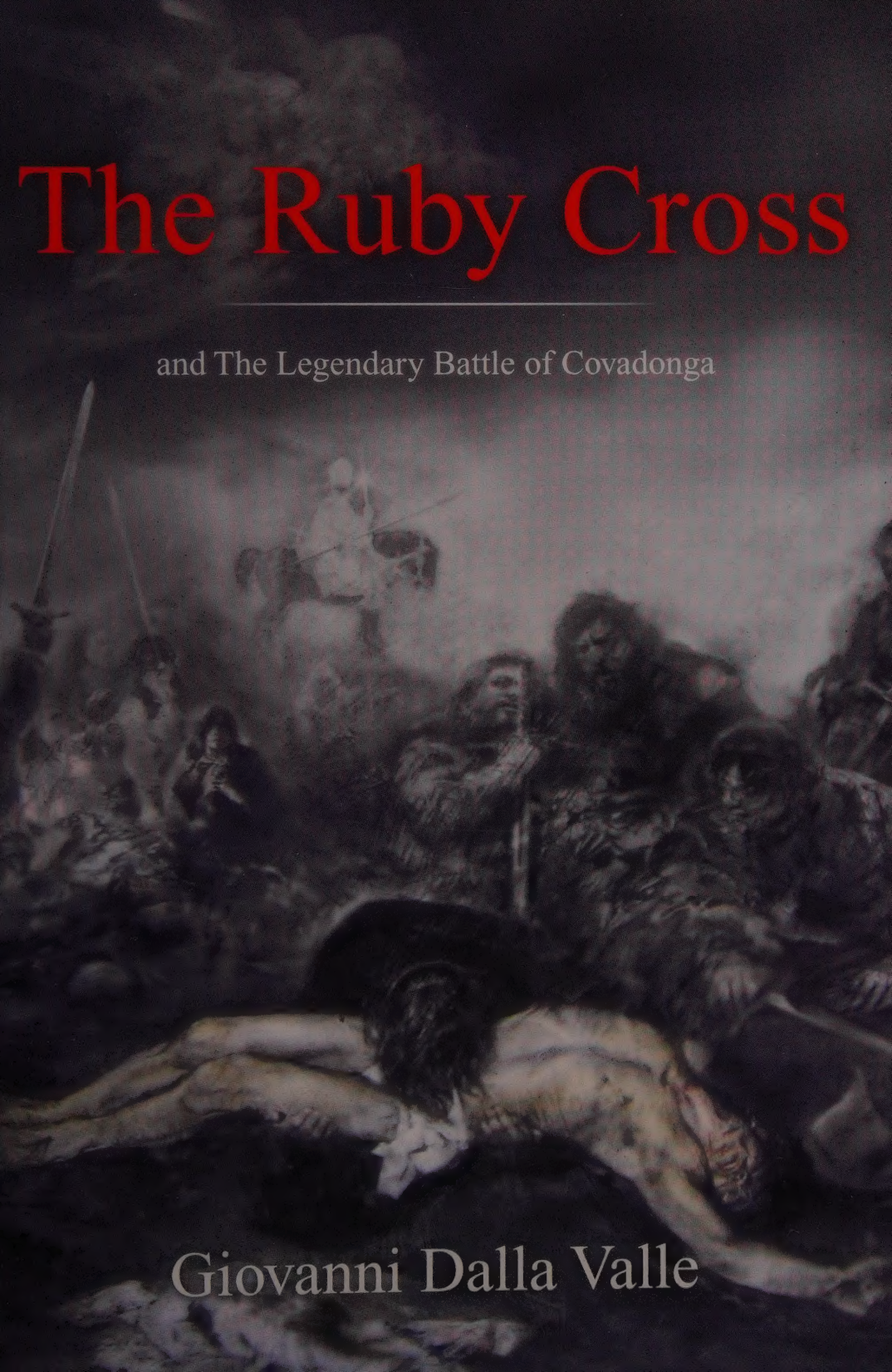
The Ruby Cross

and The Legendary Battle of Covadonga



Giovanni Dalla Valle

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and The Legendary Battle of Covadonga

Giovanni Dalla-Valle

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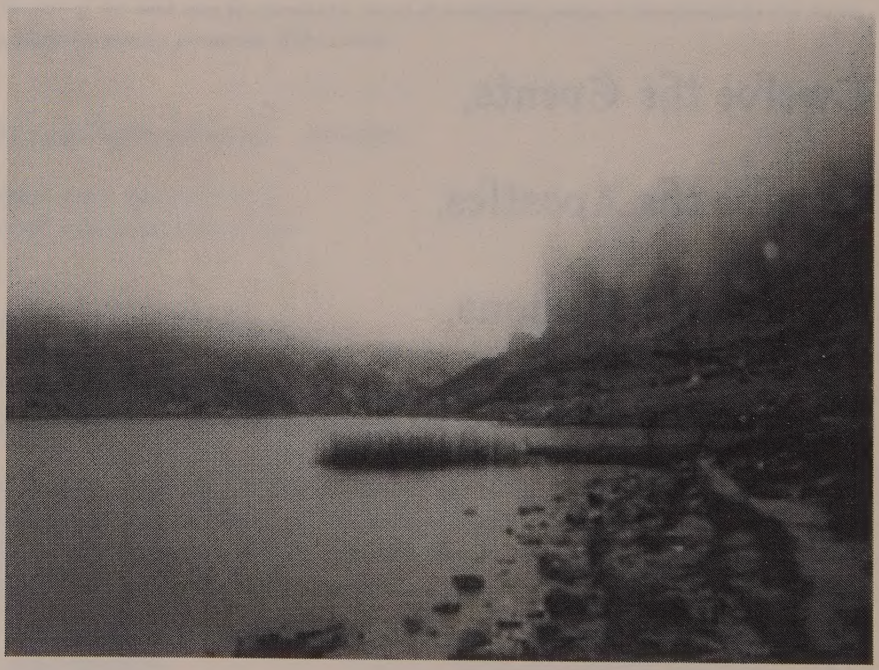
Twelve the Events,

Twelve the Apostles,

Twelve the Demons,

Twelve the Crosses to stop them!



INTRODUCTION

In 711 AD, the Berber general Tariq ibn Ziyad landed on the southern coast of Spain, near present-day Gibraltar, and defeated the troops of Roderic, last king of the Visigoths, on the banks of the sadly famous River Guadalete. Within the space of three years, Tariq's Berber troops and the Arab troops of Emir Musa ibn Nusayr and his son Abd El Aziz had invaded the whole of Spain, with the exception of Asturias, Cantabria and part of Vasconia.

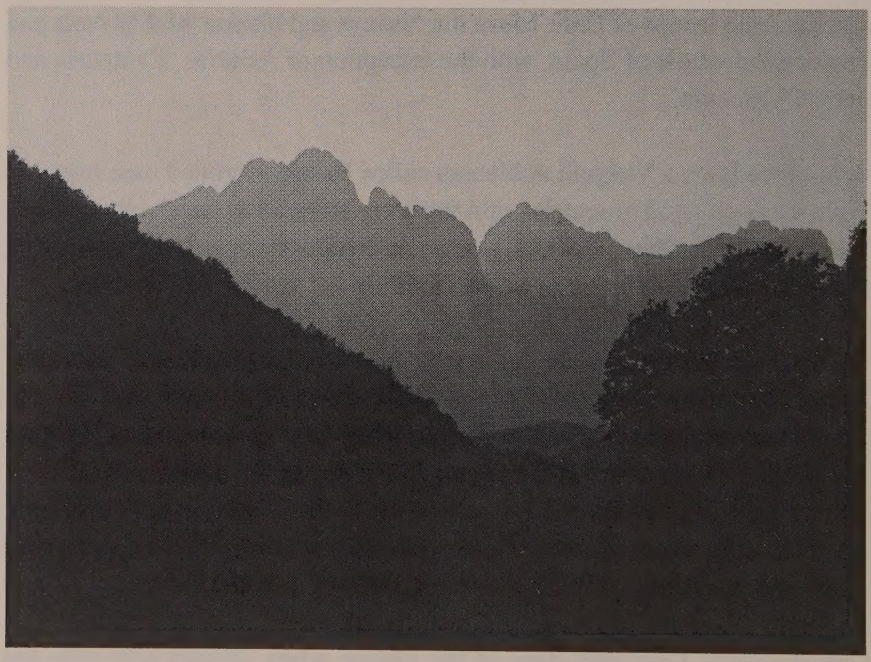
Some time later, a Visigoth nobleman called Pelayo recruited men from the high, snow-covered mountains of Asturias to make a last stand. His example was followed by Petro, Duke of Amaya, the ancient fortress in the Cantabrian mountain range, which was also still holding out against the Saracens.

At Valle de Autrigonia, on the border between Cantabria and Vasconia, Judge Hernando, brother-in-law of Duke Petro of Amaya, and his son Toribio are anxiously living out the declining days of Roman and Visigoth civilisation. Hernando is still a pagan, like many of the inhabitants of those remote villages, but his son has grown up in the Christian faith and been educated at the court of Amaya in accordance with the wishes of his mother Goswinta, a Visigoth noblewoman and sister of domnus Petro.

Unfortunately, Goswinta died of the plague when Toribio was only ten years old.

Hernando and Toribio Del Valle do not yet know that Petro intends to invite them to fight in Asturias, but more importantly they are still ignorant of the mission that will be entrusted to them by the Apostle James, guardian of the Ruby Cross. This sacred symbol is due to appear at the Third Event, to turn human history in favour of the love of God.

The fateful battle of Covadonga is approaching.



Military campaigns of Berber general Tariq ibn Ziyad (darkest arrows), Emir Musa ibn Nusayr and his son Abd al-Aziz (dashed arrows), mainly between 711 and 714 AD. The precise year of Covadonga's battle is still debated today.

CHARACTERS

Toribio: is twenty years old and the hero of the story, together with his father Hernando. He lost his Visigoth mother, Goswinta, who died of the plague, when he was still a child. A Christian, he was educated at Amaya, at the court of his uncle Petro and aunt Teodosinda, by the monk Valerio.

Hernando: judge of Valle de Autrigonia and father of Toribio. At thirty-nine years of age, he is already regarded as getting on in years.

A pagan, he prays to Erudino, the chief god of the Cantabrian tribes. He cannot stand the Vasconians, although he is half-Vasconian by birth, and is hostile to all the neighbouring counts, especially the counts of San Emeterio and Calahorra. He wears a malachite pendant.

Valerio: is thirty-five years old and was born in Constantinople. A Benedictine monk, he was trained in Rome, Pavia and Toledo. He was Toribio's tutor at Amaya, having Toribio in his charge from the age of thirteen. Since then, the two have become inseparable friends.

Petro: duke of Amaya and the whole of Cantabria, about forty-five years old and a good Christian. He is the friend of Duke Pelayo, a Visigoth like himself, whose family had taken shelter at his court while they were being persecuted by old King Witiza (reigned 702-710). He had married his sister Goswinta to Hernando twenty years before, which makes him the brother-in-law of Hernando and uncle of Toribio.

He shows tremendous courage during the siege of Amaya, in the middle of the story, and then leads the main characters until the battle of Covadonga. His son Alfonso is later to become the first King of Spain.

Teodosinda: the wife of Duke Petro, about ten years his junior. She lives in the Domus Ducalis at Amaya, where she spends her time listening to

music and, since she is illiterate, having the Latin classics read to her by more educated relatives.

Pelayo: forty-two years old, is the military leader of the Visigoths and resides with his family in an old roman villa at Cangas de Onis, in the heart of Asturias. He is the son of Duke Fafila, who (according to legend) was killed by Duke Witiza for refusing to let him have his wife. Following Witiza's coronation as king, Pelayo's family had to flee from Toledo and took refuge at Amaya, at the court of Duke Petro.

Pelayo is a convinced Christian. He took part in the Battle of Guadalete (the Battle of Rio Gades in the story) alongside Roderic, last king of the Visigoths. An experienced yet disillusioned politician, it takes him a long time to recruit enough warriors among the Asturian and Cantabrian valleys to resist the Islamic invaders.

Gaudiosa: the wife of Pelayo, about thirty-five years old. She had known Toribio's mother since her stay at the convent of Santa Maria of Cosgaya, where Pelayo's sister Verosinda was also educated nearly twenty years before. She treats Toribio as a son and encourages his love for her daughter Agasinda.

Fafila: Pelayo's eldest son, seventeen years old. He eventually marries Froliuba and will become King of Asturias after the death of his father.

Agasinda: Pelayo's elder daughter, fifteen years old. She soon falls in love with Toribio.

Ermesinda: Pelayo's youngest daughter, only six years old when these events take place. One day she will marry Alfonso, son of Duke Petro, destined to become King Alfonso I on the death of his brother-in-law Fafila.

Verosinda: Pelayo's sister, about thirty years old. She is the abbess of the convent of Santa Maria of Monsacri. According to legend, the Berber Governor Munuza lusted after her on account of her beauty. She, too, had known Toribio's mother, Goswinta, when she was being educated at the

convent of Santa Maria of Cosgaya. She wears a sapphire pendant in the shape of an eagle, given her by her grandfather.

Froliuba: only fourteen years old, but already something of an Amazon, skilled with bow and arrow. She is the daughter of Isilde and the Visigoth General Teodomir, who was killed by Oppa in the Battle of Guadalete.

She was brought up as an Arian but marries Fafila according to the Catholic rite to become Queen of Asturias (an attested fact).

Amagoya: grandmother of Toribio and mother of Hernando. A pure-blooded Vasconian, she is the niece of Momo of Pamplona, patriarch of the Vasconian people. Renowned for her wonderful oatmeal pancakes.

Momo of Pamplona: brother of Hernando's maternal grandfather, who was a Vasconian. More than eighty years old, he is a real Methuselah for that day and age.

Count Eneko: son of Momo of Pamplona and Count of Calahorra. Hernando takes a dim view of him, as he does of all Vasconians.

He has a marginal role in frustrating the initial efforts of Pelayo to recruit allies, confirming the peevish nature of the Vasconians.

Count Sancho: an older cousin of Duke Petro, he is Count of San Emeterio (modern Santander). He rules over the Cantabrian coast and is very rich and avaricious.

Judge Aurelio: a nephew of Count Sancho and judge of Flaviobriga (modern Castro Urdiales). He never actually appears in the story, but we hear about him because of a long-standing dispute with the neighbouring jurisdiction of Hernando, caused by Count Sancho's family favouritism.

Gunderic: the Visigoth emissary of Duke Petro who arrives at Valle in the very beginning to invite Hernando and Toribio to join Duke Petro and Pelayo in the Asturias. At the beginning of the story, he tells the shocking tale of the battle of Rio Gades, where he had fought with King Roderic and

General Teodomir on the banks of the River Guadalete. His account of this disaster is quite different from the generally accepted version of the story.

Liuva and Teudiselo: Visigoth brothers, the right-hand men of Duke Petro. Liuva has lost an eye; Teudiselo is missing an ear.

Fruela: a young protégé of Toribio's from the Asturian tribe of the Arcadeunians. He is eighteen years old but something of a coward.

Flavius the Roman: a Hispano-Roman guide, educated at the school for military scouts of Legio (modern León). He is an anachronism, the last Roman soldier of a now fallen empire, and sole survivor of a waning civilization.

The three Swabian counts: Ricimir, Filimir and Gildimir. The last surviving noblemen of the ancient Kingdom of Swabia (now Portugal). Very handsome with their bobbed hair.

The six Asturian chiefs: Xilo the Grey, son of Xinto, chief of the Luggonians (the tribe living in eastern Asturias) and of the Peniian sub-grouping; Cilio, a Luggonian, chief of the Arnuminians; Abilio, a Luggonian, chief of the Abilicians; Milio, a Luggonian, chief of the Pembelians; Bartuelo, a Luggonian, chief of the Arcadeunians; and Naelio, chief of the Paesicians, the tribe living in western Asturias.

The nine Cantabrian chiefs: Virone, chief of the yellow Coniscian tribe; Talanio, chief of the blue Blendians; Tridio, chief of the amaranthine Salaenians; Turenno, chief of the purple Plentusians; Atia, chief of the black Tamaricians; Alia, chief of the green Avaraginians; Aluane, chief of the red Conganians; Origeno, chief of the ochre Organomescians; and Doidero, chief of the brown Vadinensians.

The twelve Visigoth swordsmen: Duke Pelayo's lieutenants, who form his personal bodyguard. Their names are Anila, Aprila, Dunila, Neufila, Dadila, Brandila, Rikkila, Wadila, Sunnila, Murila, Beccila, Egila. In fact they are the twelve Apostles in disguise.

Tariq ibn Ziyad: A devout Muslim, aged around thirty, he is the Berber general from Tangiers who defeated King Roderic in the Battle of the Guadalete in July 711.

A fascinating man and skilful commander, he engages in an epic duel with Pelayo at the end of the battle of Covadonga.

Musa ibn Nusayr: a Syrian of the Lakhm tribe. Aged almost sixty, he is the Muslim governor of North Africa and Emir of Spain. He leads the invasion, assisted by Tariq and his son Abdul. He appears only in the end, directing his powerful army during the first part of the Battle of Covadonga.

Abd el Aziz: also known as Abdul. The son of Musa, he leads the invasion of Galicia and subsequently of Asturias, landing his troops at Xixón (modern Gijón). He later becomes governor of El Andalus (now Andalusia).

Munuza: a Berber, like Tariq, with whom he is on friendly terms. As governor of Xixón (Gijón), he helps the troops of Abd el Aziz to attack Asturias. Lustful by nature, he wants the most beautiful Visigoth women for his harem.

Luivigoto and Sunifredo: the former was the widow of King Ervigio, known as "the Greek" (reigned 680-687). In association with Count Sunifredo, and under the influence of Bishop Sisberto, in 692 she hatched a plot against King Egica (reigned 687-702). The pair were arrested. Sunifredo had his eyes put out; Luivigoto was incarcerated in a convent.

Bishop Sisberto (who is one of the twelve demons in the novel), fled to Ceuta (to this day a Spanish enclave in Morocco). From there, almost twenty years later, he is believed to have plotted with the Byzantine Count Julian in assisting Tariq ibn Ziyad's Berbers to cross the Strait and land in Spain.

The repentant Queen Luivigoto appears as an extremely old nun in Verosinda's Abbey and gives useful advice to Toribio.

Sunifredo, also very old, is a blind beggar on the sun-burned streets of Toledo when he suddenly recognizes the voice of the treacherous Sisberto,

becomes miraculously young and fit again and engages in a breath-taking duel with the demon, before the eyes of our heroes and a shocked crowd.

Julian of Ceuta: the Byzantine count said to have provided the ships to enable Tariq's Berbers to land near present-day Gibraltar. Apparently he was seeking vengeance on King Roderic for having raped his daughter Florinda while she was Roderic's guest at Toledo.

The demon Sisberto: the "bishop" who was behind Luivigoto and Sunifredo's plot against the old King Egica. He takes on the persona of Monofonso of Palencia.

The demon Jabalio: so-called because his face resembles that of a wild boar. He disguises himself as Kupraman, rabbi of the Toledo synagogue.

The demon Oppa: chief of the twelve demons and a key figure throughout the saga of the Gemmed Crosses. He is fat, always dressed in white, and carries a red staff. It would appear that a bishop by the name of Oppa (maybe a brother of King Witiza) really existed and tried to persuade Pelayo to surrender to the Saracens before the Battle of Covadonga. His aim is simply to find the Ruby Cross and alter the course of History in favour of Evil.

Sanctus Jacobus (Saint James): Saint James the Great, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ, known to the Spanish as "Santiago". His tomb was discovered in the 9th century in Galicia and the cathedral that now bears his name was erected to shelter his bones. Today Santiago de Compostela is visited by pilgrims from all over the world.

CONTENTS

Prologue 1

1. The Del Valle Family 3
2. The True Story Of The Fate Of King Roderic 13
3. The Cantabrians 25
4. The Cult Of Erudino 36
5. Porto Vereasueca 44
6. Cangas De Onis 53
7. Pelayo 63
8. Agasinda 73
9. The Bishop Of Toledo 86
10. The Governor Of Xixon 95
11. Preparations For Defence 107
12. Santa Maria De Monsacri 119
13. Love In The Ruined Chapel 131
14. Devilry In The Monsacri 139
15. San Martín De Turieno 145
16. Flavius The Roman 159
17. The Sierra Grande 167
18. Toledo 176
19. In Munuza's Harem 181
20. Tariq Ibn Ziyad 186
21. The Red Lion 197
22. No Man's Land 205
23. Amaya 216
24. Fight To The Death 227
25. The Fall Of Amaya 239
26. In The Hall Of The Kings 250
27. The Grace Child 261
28. Cantabria Awakes 272

29. Pelayo Bewitched 282
30. Moonlight Cavalcade 296
31. The Dawn Surah 306
32. Covadonga! 313
33. The Charge Of The Cantabrians 324
34. The Cyclamen Valley 335
35. Hosanna In Excelsis Deo 349
36. Triumph Of The Faith 357
37. The Final Farewell 368
38. Valerio 380

Epilogue 394
Appendix 405
Chronology of Visigoth Rulers 406
Pictures from the author's travels 417
Glossary 425
Acknowledgements 451

PROLOGUE

Right bank of the River Dniester, AD 375.

"People to the East!" yelled the sentry stationed on the eastern slope of the hill that rose from the river bank.

His shouting woke Centurion Tullius, still hung-over from the previous night's drinking bout, when he had wagered that there could be no more than three hundred of them. He staggered across the tent and, with a slight sense of foreboding, peered round the square of canvas that covered the entrance. He was petrified by the sight that met his eyes.

Thousands and thousands of them were marching across the steppe towards the ford: warriors with long dust-encrusted beards, followed by their families; women young and old, struggling under heavy burdens; dirty children keeping up a constant bawling; carts and wagons loaded with household items; playful dogs which worried the oxen and chased pigs, geese and hens.

Among them all, a stout, fat man stood out in his clean white robe. The barbarian hoards gave him plenty of space, as if they were in fear of him. He walked in silence, his gaze fixed on the horizon, a red sceptre grasped in his left hand.

Tullius stood stock still observing them; the procession seemed endless. He had never seen anything like it in his long career with the legions. He was not even aware of the tears coursing down his cheeks. Now it was clear as day: the end of civilisation was at hand.

CHAPTER I

THE DEL VALLE FAMILY

Pico Blanco, Cantabria: a spring day at the dawning of the 8th century AD.

"We'll get a better view from the top", said Toribio, urging his horse up the slope. The monk was a long way behind, struggling along on the back of his mule.

"By all the Roman Popes and Byzantine Emperors . . . Toribio, wait for me. How many times do I have to tell you, I'm the wrong side of thirty?"

"Come on, Valerio, we're nearly there", replied his companion, pushing aside a fir branch with the blade of his sword.

They were approaching a spacious clearing and the sky opened up overhead as the trees thinned out. Two falcons took to the air in alarm. The horse continued unperturbed. Toribio gave it its head and galloped across the clearing, to where the ground sloped away to the south. Here he reined in his mount, gazing in wonder. Before him lay the silent valley. To the west he could see the peaks of the Asturias, towering severely above their bluish lower slopes; to the east rose the pink-flushed mountains that separated his valley from Vasconian territory; below him a deep gorge wound its way like a green serpent through the sun-scorched landscape.

"The River Ebro", he whispered to himself.

"What a wonderful sight", echoed the voice of the monk, who had ridden up beside him.

"How about building it here?" asked Toribio.

"If God so wills, it shall be done. You are the Lord of these valleys. You will erect our new parish church".

"My father is in charge here, and I don't know if he will agree", said Toribio, a wry smile betraying his feelings.

"Your father is struggling to come to the true faith. He still thinks in terms of spirits and the ancient fertility gods, but you are a Christian

of proven worth; after all, I educated you myself!", said Valerio with a smile.

"My father will find it. He's not too old. Give him time", replied the other, then, more quietly: "If only mother were still alive . . . he would have found it already".

"These things are sent to try us, but I will pray for him", added Valerio, trying to encourage the boy, as he got down from his mule.

"Why don't we take this rock as marking the position of the altar?" he suggested.

"Fine, but we shall have to cut down those trees over there. The men will need room to install the windlasses", replied Toribio, pretending he was not thinking of his mother.

"One thing at a time, it took even the Lord seven days to create the world, didn't it?"

"I thought it was six".

"That'll do! . . . You'd do better to get off that beast of yours and help me clear these weeds, we need to mark out the perimeter".

Toribio was about to move, when something drew his attention, far off in the majestic valley that gaped wide open below them.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to lend a hand?", asked the monk in surprise.

"Wait, there's something wrong", said Toribio, and suddenly his face clouded over.

"San Martino, give me patience. What is it now?", asked the monk, who could no longer hold the large stone he had lifted.

"There, in the gorge, I can see them!" shouted Toribio in excitement. "Saracens, Saracens! Look! . . . in the river gorge! They're already here!", he cried, pointing with his sword.

Valerio screwed up his eyes and, far off in the distance, made out some black and white dots advancing up the gorge. Then he looked up at the sun.

"Let's get out of here! It's already past nones and they will be here before evening!" he yelled.

"We must warn my father. Never mind the mule. We'll get there quicker with you riding pillion", cried Toribio.

And, pulling the monk up behind him, he spurred his horse back down the rugged mountainside.

Towards sunset, they reached the monastery of St. Joanne and raised the alarm.

"The horn, the horn, sound the horn!", hollered Valerio, jostling and shoving the other monks, who had no idea what had got into him. He eventually grabbed Wilfonso of Malaga by the hood and almost propelled him up the staircase of the northern tower.

"Get up there, blow Alaric's horn with all the breath the Holy Spirit inspires in you", he said to the terrified young man, then swept on to the chapel to warn the prior and the older monks, who were observing vespers.

Wilfonso ran up the stairs not knowing why. On reaching the top floor of the tower, he made his way to the enormous bronze horn suspended from the roof beams by thick leather straps. It was said to have belonged to Alaric II and had been saved by his faithful retainers when the Visigoths had fled from the Vogladensian Fields, beaten by the Franks, two centuries earlier. Wilfonso had difficulty in pulling the dust-covered instrument towards him, then took courage and set his lips to the mouthpiece. At first it emitted only a feeble whistle. Then, almost miraculously, he felt his chest swell with rage. His shoulders shook and vibrated, and he felt he could almost have flown. His breath exploded inside the horn and an ancient, almost forgotten sound suddenly ripped apart the tranquillity of the Cantabrian valleys.

OOOOONN ! OOOOONN! OOOOONN! The sound echoed sinister from valley to valley. Children stopped playing and looked at their elders; the adults fell silent, raised their eyes and joined their hands in prayer. Beacons were quickly lit, first in the village of San Petro, on the other side of the valley, then in San Rocco, to the west, then, far away to the north, on the heights of the Sierra Espinosa. From here the fires multiplied and appeared in the twilight along the Sierra Escudo, the Sierra Santa Maria and, finally, on the Bishaya Mountains. From valley to valley, the alarm spread, first along the Rio Aturia, then along the Sauga and the Rio Megrada, and finally along the Rio Pas to the monastery of San Michel. From San Joanne, the signal was received immediately at the Valle fortress, home of Toribio's father, *domnus* Hernando, who judged the territory on behalf of the Duke of Amaya.

Toribio changed horses. The monks brought him a torch. Then, leaving Valerio at the monastery, he galloped off towards Valle. Meanwhile the clans of the Rio Aturia were conferring with one another, the village headmen giving instructions to messengers, choosing the strongest young men, kitting them out with leather body armour and helmets, arming them with shields, swords, axes and war spears. They gave orders for fires to be lit along roads and pathways, at short intervals, for ease of movement.

Toribio soon arrived at Rio Tondo. At the Roman bridge he met Lucio and Lario, the two servants sent by his father, who escorted him, exhausted as he was, into Valle. It was already dark, but the village was lit by dozens of torches.

"They have crossed the Ebro!", he gasped, to the man who was waiting for him on the threshold of the stone-built fortress, surrounded by peasants, women, old men and children who had come in from the neighbouring villages.

Short and of middle age, he stood rock-solid in his leather boots on the entrance platform. He was wearing white woollen breeches and a red coat, pulled in at the waist by a wide belt embossed with the effigy of a lion. On his barrel chest hung a pendant of malachite, while his dark-skinned face was graced by a thick beard and prominent moustache. A long mane of curly chestnut-coloured hair, now going grey, cascaded onto his shoulders. His eyes sparkled.

"How many of them are there?", asked *domnus* Hernando, with a stern expression.

"I saw only a few, just a platoon, maybe twenty, but they must have been Arabs: they were wearing turbans and black cloaks and armour, and riding fleet-footed white mounts!".

"They are only on reconnaissance, then, else they would have been wearing their crescent-moon helmets", he replied, continuing to hold his son's gaze. Of course, Toribio had left home that morning without giving any explanation.

"But you have done well to raise the alarm", continued his father. "Now they have seen the beacon fires, they will know we are waiting for them". He nodded his approval and Toribio gave a sigh of relief.

Hernando surveyed his people, the peasants holding their straw hats, faces closed and anxious, the women with babes in arms, waiting on his words.

"They'll slaughter us all, Lord. What shall we do?", snivelled one old woman.

"They'll cut our hands off, as they did to the Berones", said a bearded youngster.

"No, worse, our heads, like the Vasconians in Pamplona, then they'll leave us to rot in the sun!", said another young man with an emaciated face.

"Hey, that's enough of such talk", interrupted the throaty voice of an elderly woman wearing a tunic embroidered with flowers. The speaker was grandma Amagoya, Hernando's mother, a short, slim woman with a head of still-black hair and a pair of strikingly beautiful black eyes which hinted of Mediterranean climes.

"Your fathers sweated blood for these valleys, first to defend us against the Romans, then to hold the Goths at bay. It won't be the first time!"

"No, mother, it won't be the first time, but these are Saracens and they want the whole earth", replied Hernando thoughtfully, then, with a trace of irritation: "Mother, like it or not, my wife was a Goth and we owe the Goths respect. They give us laws to live by and allow us to prosper, and the Duke of Amaya is my brother-in-law!"

"They are foreigners nonetheless. They have trampled on our traditions and would have us believe in a single God", grumbled the old lady. "And as for these Chaldeans . . . They say that they, too, believe in just one God. Let's hope they never agree together, them and their ridiculous stories. Enough, I'm too old for these matters . . . I'd better go and look for bread for all of these families", she concluded, stalking off towards the cooking hut.

Hernando watched her out of the corner of his eye, then started speaking again, as if no one had heard her imprecations. "As for our cousins of Pamplona", he said, "they had it coming to them, betraying first us, then themselves . . . a cursed race . . . that's what they are, the Vasconians. Not even the Romans trusted them, so who will help them now?"

He noted smiles of satisfaction on the lips of the eldest of his listeners. His words did not please Toribio. If truth be told, his grandmother was Vasconian and it was not right to speak in such terms in her absence, just to curry favour with the village folk.

"What must we do?", he asked his father, with the intention of calling the assembly to order and putting a stop to the offensive remarks.

His father understood his motive and, pointing his finger, ordered Lucio and Lario to remain at the door. Then, with a sweeping gesture, he invited the older men to enter the main hall of the fortress, where his butler Decio had set out refreshments in the warmth of an enormous fireplace. Here, seated at the head of a wide oak table laden with loaves of bread, cheeses, walnuts, bowls of smoked pork soup, goat's milk, honey and jars of wine, Hernando began to explain what was expected of a man who was the Duke's Judge, not just any old tribal leader.

"My brother-in-law Petro, Visigoth Duke of Amaya, sent a messenger to me shortly before the arrival of that vagabond son of mine, who goes off planting churches while we are readying for war", he said, provoking raucous laughter from the old men gathered round the table.

Toribio listened in silence, accustomed to this sort of humiliation.

"Well", continued Hernando, "the messenger was dog tired . . . so I served him a meal and told him to take some rest. Now Decio will go and see if he has recovered his strength and can deliver his message and answer our questions", and with these words he nodded to the fat old man standing by the hearth.

While waiting, the elders began lamenting and expressing doubts about the forces they could count on. One recalled the disastrous outcome of the battle of Rio Gades; others recounted rumours of clashes between Swabians and Arabs in far-off Galicia; still others talked confusedly about Vasconian revolts around Tarragona; and one asked whether Agila, eldest son of the late King Wittiza, was still living in the neighbourhood of Narbonne. The sound of a man clad in armour became louder, until the mumbling stopped and they all turned towards the doorway of the council chamber.

The old retainer came in stiffly, leading a tall, powerfully built young man, with a luxuriant blond beard and moustache. He wore a coat of chain mail which covered his white linen tunic and fell almost to his heels, and a helmet with gilded frontlet and nose protector. Tied to his back, over his red surcoat, they could make out the shape of an enormous shield and the majestic hilt of a Visigoth broadsword. You could have heard a pin drop. Hernando introduced him as the knight Gunderic—envoy of *domnus* Petro, Duke of Amaya and leader of the Cantabrian Visigoths—and invited him to speak while he translated his words into the Autrigonian dialect.

The knight thanked them for their hospitality and warned that he would have to return without delay, because at Amaya they feared an imminent

attack. He hoped he would not cause offence by departing so soon. Hernando interpreted and the elders nodded their assent. Then Gunderic announced that Duke Petro was expecting Hernando and his son Toribio at Cangas de Onis, for a meeting to which Duke Pelayo had invited all the tribal leaders of Cantabria, together with a number of Vasconian counts and all the heads of the Asturian tribes. Again Hernando began to translate but, suddenly in doubt, turned to the knight.

"Why Pelayo?", he asked. "Was my brother-in-law not up to the task?"

"I cannot say more than I have said!", said the Visigoth, cutting him short.

The elders began grumbling again. No one had heard that name. Some remembered Duke Petro, who had come to Valle twenty years earlier for the wedding of his sister Goswinta to their leader Hernando, but no one had ever heard of Pelayo. They did not know how far the war had spread. They believed that the whole of Hispania, apart from Cantabria, was now in Arab hands, not realising that resistance still continued in the Asturias. Above all, they did not see why they should help the Asturians, rather than the Asturians help them.

"The Asturians are worse than the Vasconians", opined one elder, wrapped in a black woollen cloak. "They murdered my grandfather as he was returning from Xixon; they are mean-minded and mistreat their womenfolk!"

"That's true", began another, "I've heard a story of them selling a hundred young virgins to the Chaldeans! Better a thousand times the company of a Vasconian dog!", and he spat on the ground.

"And I've been told of cruel fairies who live along the banks of the Deva; they call them Xanas!", broke in another of the elders.

"No, I've been told they are good-natured, and they are not fairies but real women, and exceedingly beautiful, too!", interrupted another.

"Definitely not, the Xanas belong to the Chaldeans, I know that for sure", said another of the old men sitting nearby, chewing a soft piece of bread he had dipped in the bowl of honey.

"And what do you know about it, Caelia? You've never been further than the Rio Aturia", replied the earlier speaker mockingly.

"Liar! That's not true. I have travelled as far as Rio Pas, and met the leader of the Conisci, Virone. Those are real warriors for you, not like ours!", replied Caelia, losing his temper.

"Lower your crest, Caelia, or your wife will wring your neck tomorrow morning!", added another ancient, provoking a general outbreak of mirth.

And so they went on teasing one another, until Hernando lost patience.

"That's enough!", he yelled, bringing his fist down on the table so that all the bowls leapt in the air and a flask of wine overturned."At least be respectful in the presence of a knight from Amaya", he ordered.

"I'll explain to you myself who Pelayo is, then", he continued. "This is what my brother-in-law told me the last time I was in Amaya: Pelayo is the son of Duke Fafila, whom Wittiza, son of King Ergica, strangled with his own hands when he was Duke of Tuy. This was because Fafila, when he was at Ergica's court, had refused to let Wittiza have his wife", he said, giving the elders time to absorb the full import of the scandal.

"When Wittiza became king . . .", he continued, "Fafila's family had to go into hiding and were received and protected at Amaya by Duke Petro, whose sister Goswinta, my poor late wife, had known Pelayo's sister, Verosinda, and his future wife, Gaudiosa, at the monastery of Santa Maria of Cosgaya, where the Deva mountains separate our territory from the Asturias . . . . Pelayo, who at the time of his father's death was barely fifteen years old, was not able to return to the court in Toledo until Wittiza's death", he explained, to general astonishment.

"And that's not all", he added, slowly surveying the old mountain folk before him, who most likely had no idea what the court of Toledo was.

"Pelayo fought on the Rio Gades", he said, stopping again to let his words sink in.

The old men began to murmur their disapproval. They all knew what the outcome of this battle had been . . . even up there in the valley of the Rio Aturia. But the most shocking revelation was yet to come.

"And Pelayo was a friend of King Roderic", Hernando added.

At this name the elders rose from their seats. A chorus of disapproval went up from those around Hernando and spread to the back of the room, where Gunderic was still standing. That name had been covered in ignominy throughout Hispania since the day of the defeat at Rio Gades.

"Pelayo?", exclaimed Hernando, turning to the knight, "But in the name of all the demons of these mountains, what does a friend of Roderic, the traitor, want with us?"

Gunderic was already tense enough, but now his patience was exhausted.

"*Domne* Hernando, Judge of the Autrigonian valleys, I am merely an envoy. My orders are simply to bring you this message", he answered, containing his anger. He himself had fought on the banks of that river and knew exactly what had happened, but he felt it beneath him to explain things to this council of ignorant mountain folk. Toribio understood that once again his father had managed to irritate an innocent third party with his bad manners.

"Knight Gunderic is our guest, father, he is not obliged to answer these questions", he dared to say in reproof.

"Hernando raised his eyebrows, but understood that he had gone too far.

"I did not permit you to speak, but what you say is true", he said and, apologising to the knight, ordered Decio to escort him to the guest room, then prepare two days' victuals for him. Finally, he reassured him that he and his son accepted Petro's invitation. They would leave with him before dawn, would breakfast together at Attilio's inn at the Rio Tondo crossroads, then they would go their separate ways: he and Toribio to join the Via Agrippa, Gunderic in the direction of Amaya. The knight was relieved by this sudden change of attitude, thanked the Judge, and followed the old retainer.

One of the elders then rose and began to speak: "Judge Hernando, allow me to advise you to take a strong escort. The folk from San Petro and San Bartolomeo have sent us fifty young men, some of the strongest and healthiest, and we here in Valle can raise at least seventy; you would be unwise to travel, just the two of you, all the way from here to the Asturias".

Hernando was moved by his words.

"Dear Taeda", he replied, "your words bear witness to the loyalty your family has always shown me, but do not worry. My son Toribio and I will manage on our own. The Via Agrippa is safer since Sancho, count of San Emeterio, has established patrols and watch-towers. It will take us only a day to reach Pico Dobra, where I will pray at the altar of Erudino. In two days we shall have crossed the Deva, and from there we shall make our way to Cangas de Onis.

Another old man asked leave to speak: "Judge Hernando, I will pray that Mars will protect you, but remember that the Xanas live in the woods along the Deva; they might cast a spell on you".

"Then I shall at last find out who they are, these nymphs or women who seem to have captured everyone's imagination", replied the Judge on an expansive note. "Just do what I tell you: keep those fifty young men from the other valleys here at the fortress, and send ours to garrison the Pomar Pass". And, determination written on his face, he concluded: "I shall not leave you any longer than necessary, but this is a war and we must prepare for the worst".

The elders were reassured by these words. This was *iudex* Hernando speaking, the acknowledged leader of all their tribes.

Without more ado, Hernando sent for Lucio and Lario, who were still standing guard on the threshold, and told them to distribute the remains of the meal to the families waiting outside. He then dismissed those present, one by one. Just as his son was about to leave the room, while the last of the elders were still chatting with the servants, Hernando stopped him.

"Could I ask where you went this morning?"

"You already know the answer, father . . . to look for a place for a new church".

"Just as I imagined", said the other with annoyance, "with that Valerio, I wager?"

"Valerio is my best friend. He has taught me wonderful things, and mother would certainly have liked him", answered Toribio, with a hint of tension in his voice.

Hernando held back his usual string of oaths. His son had reminded him of the woman he had loved so much.

"Well, at least tell the servants where you are going next time", he said, reluctantly expressing his forgiveness.

"And then you'd come along with us?" asked Toribio with a smile.

"Get yourself off to bed, and don't let me see your face again until tomorrow", spluttered his father.

The boy obeyed, in the best of humour.

CHAPTER II

THE TRUE STORY OF THE FATE OF KING RODERIC

Toribio was woken by Decio before cock-crow.

Through the double lancet window overlooking the entrance to the fortress all was still in darkness. The embers in the copper brazier were long dead and the room was cold. The boy slid out from between the woollen blankets, naked and still sluggish from his short sleep, went over to the ash-wood table and washed his face and ears over a basin of water. Now wide awake, he slipped into a long shirt of white linen, pulled on breeches of the same colour, tied them round his waist with a cord, then put on a green velvet jerkin. Having buckled his belt, he drew a leather bodice over his head and pulled down the laces dangling from his shoulders to tie them to the buckles of his belt. He then tightened the laces over his chest, making sure that the gilded medallion bearing the effigy of a lion was right in the centre. Finally, he tied a red sash around his waist and pulled on the goose-down-lined boots that Valerio had given him on his return from Pavia.

He was almost ready. The only thing missing was the silver circlet his mother had given him for his fifteenth birthday. "One day you'll wear it round your head", she told him, "and you will be protected by me and the Lion of your fathers, so you need never fear defeat!"

Toribio wiped away a tear, then, with the tenderness of a child, set the beautiful band of Celtic crosses on his head. Suddenly a sunray lit up the room, reflecting back off the magical silver. The boy was tall and well made, with blue eyes, fresh and lively as the morning dew. His frank, noble forehead, harmonious nose, subtle cheekbones, full lips and square chin bespoke both kindliness and pride. His blond locks were the evidence of his Visigoth blood. In that light, which had appeared as if from nowhere, Toribio was not the young lad of the day before, but a grown man of twenty.

He went out into the entrance hall, where the short and swarthy Lucio was waiting for him with his weapons. Toribio attached the mace to his right side, his scabbard to the left, then, after putting on a white cape, took the shield and sword from the hands of the servant.

"No, I don't need the helmet", he said.

"You'd better wear it; you know how your father insists."

"My father can say what he wants, I don't want the helmet. All I need is this circlet to protect me from all the devils who come my way."

"As you wish, young master. May Diana protect you!"

"Diana cannot protect me, because Diana does not exist. The Virgin is our Diana, and she will protect us all," he said, venting his irritation on the pagan servant.

"Diana and Erudino have always protected us in time of war!", came the rough voice of his father from behind him.

Toribio turned round, as if he were seeing him for the first time. The Judge, who had seen thirty-nine summers, was again dressed in red. He was wearing the same belt as the previous evening and the green malachite pendant still swung across his barrel chest, which was now clothed in a short leather jacket, quilted and stuffed with horse hair. A dagger hung from his belt and, on his back, from under his bearskin coat, emerged a long, sharp-bladed spear, trimmed with strips of yellow cloth. In his right hand, he too held a sword, but shorter and squatter than Toribio's weapon. With his left hand he gripped the strap of a round wooden buckler, decorated with the fierce roaring head of a red lion. His head was protected by a leather helmet with additions that moulded themselves to his jaws and neck, while a tuft of crow's feathers adorned the crown.

"If you really won't have a helmet, at least wear a breastplate", he said.

"I don't want a breastplate, either", replied Toribio. "I want people to see the Lion on my chest. Uncle Petro's blacksmith made it for me; do you remember?"

"Stubborn as usual. Take care you don't stop an arrow! Because I'll leave you to rot where you fall, you and your memories of Amaya!", commented his father.

Toribio said nothing. It was true that his uncle had had the medallion made for him, but there was no point in responding to his father's cantankerous jealousy.

At this point, Anna, the pale and very young wife of Decio, came forward with two saddlebags and a basket of provisions. Toribio stood sipping a glass of milk and biting into a piece of flat acorn-flour bread spread with honey. His father ate nothing, but drank from a small jar of wine. Then, taking up their weapons again, they made for the stables, where they met Gunderic, who was ready and waiting. The stable-boy led out Toribio's white horse, Asfredo, his father's bay, Ederedo, and of course Gunderic's mount. The animals looked their best, fresh and well-rested. The three riders tied their shields and saddlebags to the horses' backs, mounted and galloped off. Only then did the cock crow for the inhabitants of Valle.

It was around the third hour when they reached Rio Tondo. Shortly before the Roman bridge, they reined in their horses and slowed to a walk. Attilio's inn was immediately after the bridge, in the shadow of some tall elm trees. Here they stopped and went in. Present were some young rustics playing at dice during their morning break, women breast-feeding their babies and a group of old men, who sat in silence wearing their straw hats. Hernando stroked the children's hair and exchanged a few words with their mothers, then reproached the young men for gambling and urged them to return to their work in the fields. Then, while Attilio quickly wiped down and polished the marble table top, he ordered a pitcher of wine, three bowls of olives, some fat bacon and a piece of bread.

"Sit down, gentleman", he said, "and eat. You have a two-day journey ahead of you!"

"Thank you, Judge Hernando, and now allow me to tell you a story, as I was thinking of doing yesterday evening, before I fell asleep."

"What about?", asked the Judge in rather surly fashion. "We haven't much time. Didn't you say all you had to say yesterday, in front of our village elders?"

"I should have added something about King Roderic, but they already seemed overwhelmed by the words you were relaying, and I didn't want to upset them further in your presence."

Hernando looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"What could be said about that traitor that is not already known throughout Hispania?"

"Roderic never betrayed anyone!", replied the other coldly.

"By all the fairies and nymphs of the Rio Aturia!", exclaimed Hernando. "Do you really know what you are saying? Remember I am a judge and I won't stand for lies!"

Toribio felt a mounting wave of anxiety.

"Don't offend me by calling me a liar, you would do better to listen . . . I was at Sidonia on that occasion", revealed the knight.

His companions were all agog.

"You mean the place on the Rio Gades?", asked Toribio, forgetting to let his father have precedence and attracting a black look.

"Let him go on", said his father. "I don't want to miss any of this."

Toribio lapsed into silence.

"Yes, I was right there, the place where the great battle began", replied the knight and continued his story as follows: "King Roderic had fifteen thousand men. Those devils were at most twelve thousand, and they were not all Arabs, as people say, but largely Berbers. The Africans were not even in armour: many of them fought bare-chested, with small shields, stakes, daggers and iron-shod clubs. Some had double-S-shape bows, which I had never seen before. Only the officers wore chain mail, over dark blue tunics, and were armed with long curved swords, which were also new to me. None wore helmets: the infantry had leather caps, so thin you could cut through them with a sickle blade; the officers not even that: just turbans, as white as their capes."

Hernando and Toribio were already so absorbed in his account, they did not notice that Irunia, Attilio's wife, a short hairy woman with a vast bosom, was setting out the bowls of olives and a plate loaded with fat bacon, and had already poured wine into three iron goblets.

"Our troops, on the other hand, shone bright as the sun!", continued the knight. "King Roderic wore a suit of scale armour, protecting him from neck to ankles. Over it was a white surcoat, drawn in at the waist by an eagle-shape buckle studded with amber, as our kings have always worn. He also wore a flowing red cape, lined with fur and richly edged with precious stones, and his head was protected by a helmet with a round visor, also formed of metal scales, to which were attached a neck guard and gold cheek protectors. He carried an enormous shield in the shape of a black eagle, and a broadsword similar to mine. But he also had a short pike, as in the days of Alaric the Great—or so a companion told me—to distinguish him from the other nobles.

"The nobles themselves were all clad in ankle-length chain mail, greaves and knee and elbow protection, and all carried shields, broadswords and long pikes. The archers had compound bows made of wood, sinew, bone and even horn, combining great strength and flexibility, and at least thirty arrows in their quivers. The infantry wore short coats of mail and thigh protectors, and on their feet light kid-skin boots for swiftness of movement. All—and I mean all—carried shields as tall as themselves, and wore helmets with frontlets and nose-pieces like mine."

Gunderic stopped speaking, drained his goblet and sat there for a moment. Hernando poured him more wine. The knight took up his story again, first looking down, then slowly raising his head to look the other two in the eyes: "How was it possible to lose the battle, armed as we were that day?"

"Any yet we know you lost!", said Hernando, not sparing his feelings.

"Yes, damnation, what you say is true, good Judge, but only . . .", and here he brought his fist down on the table angrily, "because we were betrayed!!!"

"Betrayed by whom?", asked Toribio, who felt all the blood drain to his legs.

"By whom?", replied the other, leaning right forward and lowering his voice. "Listen carefully to what I say, because you do not know the half of what really happened during those days."

The two men from Valle folded their arms and put their elbows on the table.

"The battle raged for seven days, in July of that year, but the leader of those devils, a certain Tariq, had disembarked the autumn before on the coast of Carteia—so they told me—near a mountain known as Calpe . . . He is said to have been helped by Julian of Ceuta, the Byzantine who wanted to wreak vengeance on King Roderic for the wrong done to his daughter Florinda. Julian had sent her to the court of Toledo, where Roderic, who could not resist beautiful women, seduced her!"

His two companions smiled.

"There's nothing to laugh about, gentlemen", continued the knight. "Julian is very powerful and owns ships which make daily crossings of the strait which separates us from Africa. The Berbers and Arabs respect him. So the Byzantine made his ships available to the Berbers: seven thousand men, they say . . . too many not to attract the attention of our sentries!

Therefore Tariq—or so I was told by some of my companions—landed his men night after night near the rock I told you about, covering their shields and weapons with calf skins, to make them look like boulders! . . . By the time our sentries realised what was happening, it was too late. They soon took Torre Cartagena, which they put to fire and the sword, built forts and settled down for the winter, while awaiting reinforcements from the governor of Africa on orders from Damascus . . . a certain Musa, they say, a very valorous Saracen. This man embarked a further five thousand men from Tangiers, and once again they were aided by Julian. Some even say that at this point Julian himself was directing operations from Torre Cartagena. Of course, I cannot be sure that all they told me is true, but this Julian must have been consumed with a mortal hatred for our king, to have come so far to kill his men."

"Cursed Byzantines! So it was they who delivered Hispania to the Saracens?", snarled Hernando.

Then, turning to Toribio: "You hear that? And that Valerio of yours . . . isn't he one of them? See what sort of people you keep company with!"

Toribio was on the point of exploding and breaking the pitcher of wine over his ill-mannered father's head. But he restrained himself: "Valerio is a monk, and churchmen have no country other than the Kingdom of Heaven", he said. "Besides, Valerio was educated in Rome, Pavia and Toledo, and has a great love of all the Iberian peoples. He has taught many students from Amaya; does that make us Byzantines?", he challenged his father.

Hernando was bursting with indignation, but the knight took Toribio's defence.

"Your son is right. The monks had nothing to do with it, and maybe neither did the Byzantines. In this case it was a personal quarrel between Julian and Roderic, as I explained, but this was only the beginning. If you will listen, you will see that this was not the real betrayal, and the saddest thing was that we Visigoths loyal to Roderic were betrayed by other Visigoths, our blood brothers!", he said, raising his voice and slamming his hands on the table. His companions were stunned.

"Do you remember Bishop Sisbertus?" asked the knight.

"Never heard the name", replied Hernando, searching his memory.

"But I have, father!", broke in Toribio. "He was Metropolitan of Toledo in the days of King Ergica. At Amaya, they told me about the plot he

hatched with the widow of King Erwig, Liuvigoto, and a nobleman called Sunifred, against the king. It all went wrong. King Ergica had Sunifred arrested and his eyes put out, while Liuvigoto was shut up in a convent and Bishop Sisbertus was stripped of his office . . . but no one knows what became of him."

"At Ceuta, that's where that renegade ended up", said Gunderic, "and from there he helped Julian against us."

"By thunder, what a vile traitor, and how fortunate he happened to be a Christian bishop, eh Toribio?", said Hernando, but his son did not take the bait.

"No, Judge Hernando, Sisbertus's malice alone would not have been sufficient to perform the evil deed I am telling you about", said Gunderic, to their even greater surprise. "If Wittiza's family had not willed it, even that coward could not have done the deed."

The pair seemed confused.

"Now listen", said Gunderic. "When Wittiza died, his relatives and courtiers wanted his eldest son Agila to succeed him, but the other nobles, tired of their arrogance and greed for privileges, eventually elected Roderic, Duke of Betica, whom they knew to be of Balthi lineage and therefore a true descendant of Alaric the Great, who defeated the Romans and brought our people to this fair land. Indeed, Roderic was the son of Teodofred, in turn son of Chindaswinth and brother of Recceswinth, the kings who gave us the *Lex Visigothorum*. They were of pure blood, not bastards like our last four kings!"

Something seemed to have stirred in Hernando's memory:

"My father often spoke to me of Chindaswinth and Recceswinth . . . the fullest flowering of the Visigoth kingdom, he said. But if Roderic was of pure lineage, why would anyone betray him?"

"Obviously because the sons of Wittiza wanted to wrest back the kingship, and so, with the help of the renegade Bishop Sisbertus, they called in the Arabs! Julian of Ceuta was also drawn in to settle his own personal score. Maybe they all hoped that the Arabs, and of course the Berbers, would not stay for long. I cannot believe that Agila and Ardabast, who are still wandering around the Narbonne area in search of a kingdom, imagined those Africans intended to mount a permanent invasion of Hispania . . . and maybe all the Christian lands, with their cursed beliefs", replied Gunderic, grasping the pitcher of wine to fill their empty goblets.

Having slaked his thirst, he continued: "When King Roderic heard of the invasion, he sent an expeditionary force under the command of General Teodomir but this failed and, after a few months, he had to withdraw his forces to Cordoba. Meanwhile, those filthy beasts had also taken Malaga and were set to conquer Sevilla with the five thousand men who had just arrived from Tangiers."

"And what did Roderic do then? Why wait all that time until July?", asked Hernando, with doubt in his voice.

"Because he was engaged against the Vasconians led by Momo of Pamplona, your relative, if I am not mistaken, who with the help of the Franks were trying to take Narbonne", replied the knight.

The Judge seemed embarrassed by the realisation that not even his own flesh and blood were exempt from this spiral of betrayal.

"Therefore Roderic, as you must be well aware, left the Vasconian affair in the hands of your brother-in-law Petro and finally, in July, came down to Cordoba with fifteen thousand men", he said, for emphasis opening and closing both hands and then just the five fingers of his right.

Then, taking another draught of wine, he added proudly: "I was there, too. Duke Petro had given me five hundred men to follow Roderic."

Toribio listened with great satisfaction to this evidence of his uncle's loyalty, which had clearly freed the king's hands. Hernando, meanwhile, was mightily embarrassed to be reminded of the conflict between his relatives, and tried to conceal it by munching olives in silence.

"At Cordoba, we met up with General Teodomir", continued Gunderic. "He received the king and those of us commanding reinforcements in the great hall of the *Magister Militum*. We were all there, including Duke Pelayo and his troops, who had just arrived from Toledo. Teodomir was discouraged, having suffered thousands of losses in the initial battles. He told us how ferocious the Berbers were, and that no one could count them . . . He did not know whether they descended from heaven or rose up out of the ground!"

"And then?", asked the Judge, somewhat reluctant to believe this exaggeration.

"And then King Roderic—alas, what a mistake!—decided he had to persuade the nobles of Wittiza's faction to join forces with his. Teodomir would not hear of it. They had taken refuge in Merida and Sevilla and had not lifted a finger to help him during the first expedition. Teodomir told Roderic his spies had informed him that Wittiza's sons had been plotting

with Julian and Sisbertus, and that there was no trusting nobles brought up by their father", explained the knight, shaking his head sadly.

"But our king—heaven forgive him—was a really stubborn man, or maybe he was just desperate. So he sent messengers to Merida to seek help and, a few days later, twenty thousand Visigoths arrived under the command of Bishop Oppa of Sevilla . . . though it was not clear where he had emerged from, if it were true that his city was under siege! These troops camped at Secunda, on the opposite bank of the river that flows through Cordoba, and there King Roderic and General Teodomir met with the Bishop in his tent. I don't know what they can have talked about, but that evening I heard that Roderic was delighted with the agreement they had come to. Maybe, I thought, he has secured recognition as king from all his subjects!

Roderic gathered us together at dawn and explained that Oppa was to march with his twenty thousand on Sevilla and attack the Saracens who were laying siege to it from behind, while we, under his and Teodomir's leadership, would descend on Carteia and attack the bulk of Tariq's forces camped at Sidonia, beyond the Rio Gades. Then the Bishop's troops would join up with us there and so bring the war to a successful conclusion."

He sipped at his wine, his hand trembling.

"Instead, that Bishop, too, betrayed us! Sevilla—as I understood later—had surrendered to the Arabs. There had never been a siege. Now, although Tariq had fewer than twelve thousand men, they were fresh and rested, while our troops, though more numerous, were tired from their long march. Oppa simply waited a week, to give the Berbers time to destroy a good proportion of our men . . . then showed up in the final stages, to attack us in the rear!"

The two men from Valle were shocked and horrified.

"So that's the truth of what happened . . .", concluded the Judge in dismay.

"And how did King Roderic meet his end?" asked Toribio, as outside the sky grew threatening and peels of thunder broke out.

"This is the most wretched part of the story, and I would like to be able to forget it, but I cannot. I was there, with Teodomir and the king. The Berbers had already won the day and our troops were on the run. Pelayo had managed to flee with the remnants of his forces to Cordoba, taking the Antequera road, but we were trapped on the banks of Lake Janda. With great difficulty we managed to break out and reach the Rio Gades with

around two thousand men, all that remained, but there we found Oppa and his twenty thousand warriors, smiles on their faces. We were surrounded", sighed Gunderic. "It was dreadful having to fight against our own kind. Many of us recognised cousins, uncles, even brothers . . . dreadful, truly horrible", his voice fading away as the storm raged outside.

"Oppa was fat and slimy in appearance, helmetless and bald. He did not even wear chain mail, just a long white toga. He rode a black charger which might have come straight out of the Apocalypse. He carried a lance and with his left hand brandished a red sceptre that gave off an infernal light. Our men were as if blinded and did not know which way to turn. Oppa's horsemen began to fire off thousands of arrows. In the end, only me, Teodomir and Roderic were left standing. Teodomir then charged Oppa's horse, but Oppa dazzled him with his light-stick, drove his lance into his chest, got off his horse, unsheathed his sword and struck off Teodomir's head. His head rolled along the ground and came to rest at our feet. The expression written on his face was dreadful, as if Teodomir had seen the devil.

Roderic and I spurred our horses towards Cordoba, but Roderic's mount, weakened by arrow wounds, soon dropped dead. I did not stop—curse my cowardice—but saw Roderic run exhausted towards the river and leap into the water. Oppa was still behind him, then—by all the powers of hell—his horse began to gallop over the waves as if they were sand dunes. Oppa was now in front of Roderic, who had lost both helmet and sword and was up to his knees in the river. Then I plucked up my courage and tried to join him, wading through the water, but I was too far away . . . too late. Oppa then dismounted, and began walking on the water himself!"

Toribio and Hernando were totally dismayed.

The knight went on with his story; not even a lightning bolt falling nearby could distract him.

"Oppa was shouting. I didn't understand the words, but it was not the language of the Goths . . . then I saw his head transformed into that of an enormous serpent. The monster slithered through the water towards Roderic and began wrapping itself around his body, until his eyes burst from the pressure . . . then it devoured him!"

Toribio and his father were struck dumb, but Gunderic continued. "At that point the serpent turned towards me. It's eyes were blazing coals. I was now closer and I felt the strength go out of me. I could no longer lift my sword. My horse had disappeared, sucked under the water. Then,

I don't know how, I was grasped by an invisible hand that dragged me towards the middle of the river, then upstream, against the current, until I lost consciousness."

A deathly silence had fallen.

"Angels and archangels!", exclaimed Toribio. "Is this all true, or are you telling us a monstrous lie?"

"Young Toribio, this is the whole truth. I escaped through amazing good fortune, maybe through angelic intervention. The fact is I was translated from one river to another, from valley to valley, for at least a hundred miles, until I woke up inside the fortress at Cordoba, where I was cared for by nuns. There I found Pelayo and a few other survivors. It was clear that Cordoba could not be defended against so many enemies, so we decided to abandon the city. Many families fled to Toledo and Salamanca, while Pelayo made his way to the Asturias and I returned to Amaya."

"And then?", asked Hernando.

"Then I learned that Cordoba had surrendered to the Saracens, and the few who had remained there were all put to the sword. Finally, Tariq also conquered Toledo, and as far as I know he is still there."

The two men from Valle remained silent for a while. Gunderic, meanwhile, lowered his head, absorbed in his memories.

"Irunia", called Hernando, addressing the buxom woman who had served them, "the wine was excellent and so was the food. Here are the *minima* we owe you . . . but where has everyone gone?"

"They are all outside, including Attilio, my lord, because of the lightening."

The Judge smiled. Such are the concerns of ordinary folk—he thought—while we are hearing stories from hell. Then it struck him that he should apologise to Gunderic.

"Sir knight, please forgive me for my discourteous words. What can you expect? I am just a judge from these mountains. We are all somewhat rough and ready up here and tend to believe what we are told. But today you have really enlightened us with your story. I hope you can now return in peace to Amaya."

He rose from his seat, as did Toribio. The knight then got up and, laying his right hand on the Judge's shoulder, replied: "Of course. There is nothing to forgive, because you are not to blame. The blame lies with the devil, who has sent us these creatures from hell. But now I must make haste; I'm afraid they will soon reach Amaya, too."

"Go, good Gunderic, and remember you are always welcome here", pronounced the Judge, signalling to Toribio that it was time they started, too.

So he accompanied the knight to the threshold and there gave him some advice on short-cuts he might take to reach Amaya more quickly. "Take the Pomar Pass and you will be at Lake Ebro before evening . . . There is a full moon, which will help you as you ride at night . . . Then take the route through the Val Misteriosa, but take care: only travel that way in the daytime . . . They say there are ghosts in those mountains."

"Better ghosts than Saracens!", replied the other with a laugh.

"May the moon protect you then", replied the little Judge.

The three exchanged final greetings in front of the inn, while, not far away, Attilio was helping the peasants to clear the road of an enormous tree that had been struck by lightning.

The knight tied his red cape over his left shoulder and set off at a gallop towards the gloomy mountains of the Vindius range.

Hernando and Toribio watched him disappear into the distance.

"What did you make of his story, father?", asked Toribio, his gaze fixed on the receding patch of red.

"It's not at all to my liking", replied the Judge. "I just hope this will all be over soon".

They exchanged a look of understanding, then mounted their horses and set off towards the Asturias.

CHAPTER III

THE CANTABRIANS

The two of them rode on without a halt. Along the cart-track they encountered nobody, as if the events that were turning the world upside down had not penetrated even the fringe of these remote Cantabrian valleys. They passed hillsides of chestnut and valleys of walnut trees, crystal-clear streams and cascading waterfalls, fields of poppies and tangles of juniper.

Not until the sixth hour did they slow down, within sight of the plain of Solana. The men folk were still in the fields, weeding out the tares that infested the growing wheat. In the village itself, a few round huts with straw roofs, only the old folk and women caring for the younger children were in evidence. The locals watched them pass from the thresholds of their humble dwellings but, despite their curiosity, no one ventured to greet the two riders. It was in any case unrealistic to expect a welcome. They had now entered the lands of Sancho, Count of San Emeterio, and it was unlikely anyone would recognise them, except by the purest chance. Two hours' journey from the Aturia Valley and they were already strangers. A toddler of about four years old emerged from the shade of a hut to ape the strange horseman with the plume of crow's feathers and the lion's head on his shield. Hernando smiled and stuck his tongue out. The child retreated immediately, only to be scolded by his mother.

A few miles further on, the pair stopped by a tall chestnut tree with spreading branches, which seemed the ideal place to make a halt. They dismounted, untied their saddlebags, trod down the thick grass, laid their shields on the ground and spread a bright red cloth between them. On this improvised table, Toribio set two loaves of bread, cheese, dried fruit and a jar of wine. Then he sat down pensively under the leafy canopy and appeared to ignore the food.

"What's the matter, Toribio? Aren't you hungry? It will be a long journey. At least eat some walnuts", urged his father.

"I'm still thinking about Gunderic's story, father . . . Do you really think he was telling the truth?"

"How could I doubt the words of a messenger from my brother-in-law?", replied Hernando. "But I confess I find it hard to believe. Great Heavens! What vile tricks they got up to with the Saracens! You heard what he said about those two bishops?"

"That's what upsets me most, how two bishops of the Church of Rome could do such things."

"But the story was plain enough. That's what happened, unless Gunderic is mad or has sold his soul to the Prince of Hades."

Toribio dismissed the suggestion: "I believe what I heard, because Gunderic seemed truly sincere and had no reason to lie, given that he was so offended by your judgement yesterday evening. But, forgive me, I can't believe those men were genuine bishops."

"So where did they pop up from . . . the depths of the Ocean?", retorted his father, with his usual arrogant sneer.

Toribio gave no ground but reacted calmly.

"Maybe they were demons, disguised as bishops."

His father raised his eyes in despair.

"I'd better block my ears. There is no hope for you. The gods grant me patience, how many lies did they put in your head at Amaya?"

"At Amaya I was taught by Valerio and Bishop Fruttuoso, and I studied the writings of that holy man Isidoro, who was also from Sevilla, like Oppa, and of another Julian, who was bishop of Toledo, like Sisbertus. I never heard or read of anyone who could change themselves into a serpent. That's the devil's work!", answered his son.

"There are as many demons as there are trees in this wood, some of them good, some of them bad, but serpents—as far as I am aware—are benign creatures, and you should respect them, as our people have always done", said his father reprovingly.

"The serpent is an evil creature. They taught me that all the troubles of this world have arisen from his treason . . . If Adam and Eve had not paid him any attention . . ."

His father interrupted: "That ridiculous story again . . . There was no such person as Adam, nor Eve! In the beginning, there was Chaos, that's all! Then Erudino imposed his own order, through Time, his father, who wanted to blind him! That's the truth as far as I am concerned."

Toribio smiled.

"Dear father, not even mother was able to convert you. Do you remember how she used to laugh when you came out with stories about the Roman gods?"

His father's face clouded over.

"Your mother was an adorable creature, but I think her soul, too, had been thoroughly confused . . . These Visigoths, whose blood runs in your veins, come from afar, from the other side of the world. How could I believe all their teachings?"

"The Visigoths come from the valleys of the Danube, the most distant of rivers, from the land where the sun rises, but their doctrines come from the Councils of Toledo, which have the blessing of the Roman pontiffs."

"That may well be the case. I have heard of many laws made by those Councils . . . but I believe what we of Valle have always believed."

Then, with a total disregard for Toribio's feelings, he added: "Tell me why these monks, who claim to know everything about medicine and healing, were unable to save your mother."

Toribio stiffened: "What do you mean, father?"

Hernando noticed his tension and answered indignantly:

"So my question troubles you? Your mother fell ill, she fought for breath, she was afflicted with fever, and red and black swellings ate away at her skin. The monks of San Joanne took her in, they covered her in powders made from stones known only to themselves and gave her herbal potions to drink. Such were the great remedies of the champions of your God!"

Toribio spat out the walnut he was chewing.

"Father, do not blaspheme. May God forgive your arrogance. Without his help, we would not be able so much as to keep a horse on its feet."

"Well, he certainly did not help your mother, this great God of yours. I did not pray to him before, and I refuse to do so in future, after all this!"

"You are wrong, father. He is seeking you, more than you can possibly imagine, but there is none so deaf as he who does not wish to hear!"

"That's enough for now. We'd do better to think of our journey. At Pico Dobra, I'll pray at Erudino's altar. He may not be as powerful as your God, but he has always protected the Cantabrians."

Toribio held his tongue, sipped wine from the jar and ate some more walnuts. His father thought he had silenced him, but he was wrong.

"Father, you speak of the Cantabrians, but are we really descendants of this people?", he asked.

"You're determined not to let me eat in peace today. No, we are Autrigonians, as I've told you many a time . . . We are of a different breed, and no one knows our true origins. But we have been here since time immemorial, long before the Goths arrived, and even before the Romans. We've always been here, like the Cantabrians and the Vasconians, or the Berones and the Varduli—though they were conquered by the Vasconians and, unlike us, now speak their language", he said with a superior smile. "We have never allowed the Vasconians to tell us what to do. Rather, we have always been friends with the Cantabrians. That is why more recent arrivals have always thought us to be one and the same."

His father now seemed more relaxed, remembering the stories he had heard from his father and grandfather on winter evenings around the hearth.

"You see, Toribio", he continued, "there was once a great emperor called Octavian, who ruled at the time of the birth of that Jesus whom you Christians claim to be the son of the one and only God. My father told me that our people had taken part in the defence of Amaya and Vellica, during ten years of fighting between Romans and Cantabrians. Then this emperor arrived with his troops and overran Cantabria in just a few months!"

"And what did our people do?", asked his son.

"They returned to the lands we inhabit to this day, but the Romans, impressed by their valour, valued them and enlisted them as allies. Thus many of our ancestors became mercenaries in the pay of the Emperors of Rome, and they served in many parts of the world: in Gaul, in Alamannia and in Britain, beyond the ice-bound sea. And even further afield: up the river you mentioned, the Danube; and over the Romans' own sea, in Africa and Numidia, where at the time there were neither Arabs nor Berbers, but tribes of ferocious black warriors with the heads and skins of lions!"

He stopped and pointed to the medallion on his belt and the one Toribio wore on his chest.

"You know why we wear this symbol?"

"Because it is the Lion of the Apocalypse, or so my mother explained, who will deliver us from Evil!"

That may well be the case, son, but it was also a gift from the Roman Emperors to our ancestors, on their return from the Numidian wars. It signifies courage, loyalty, and daring . . . the qualities we from Valle have always displayed."

Toribio was amazed by this revelation, never imagining that his ancestors had received such honours.

"But why, father, have you kept these things hidden from me?"

"Because I had no wish to reawaken them, these lions of ours. I would have preferred to die in peace. I have no love of these wars. They bring destruction, not the well-being we desire", replied his father.

Toribio was discovering an unknown side of his father's character and suddenly felt a wave of tenderness for him. But his curiosity was not to be denied.

"And when exactly did they go to Numidia?", he asked.

"I don't rightly know. My father only told me what he had heard from his old folk", answered Hernando with a shrug of the shoulders.

"And what did the Romans do next?", enquired his son.

His father gave him a solemn look, as if he had a story of great moment to recount, and replied:

"They built new cities, such as Juliobriga, Palencia and León, and roads like the Via Agrippa, which runs right across Cantabria, or the road that runs from Pisoraca to Flaviobriga, connecting Palencia with the Vasconian coast . . . and ports like San Emeterio, which our people still refer to as Portus Victoriae, and Porto Blendio, and Porto Vereasueca, where, Erudino willing, we shall arrive tomorrow evening."

"And didn't they try to convert us to their faith? After all, the Romans had Jupiter in place of God the Father", said Toribio, expressing his perplexity.

"The Romans did not trouble the peoples they conquered by trying to impose their view of the world, not like the Christians do . . . and now these Saracens!", replied his father with a touch of malice.

"Jesus never troubled anyone. Men have always believed what they wanted, but we Christians are concerned with the truth".

"The Saracens say exactly the same thing, I'm told, but I have seen and heard plenty of so-called truths in the course of my life, and so, with all due respect to your mother, I have decided to stick to my own, which I have at least known since I was a child younger than yourself".

Toribio had rediscovered his appetite and was attacking the bread.

"Well, at least all these stories have stimulated your hunger. We can expect great privations, so we must keep our strength up", said his father, pleased to see his son being sensible and enjoying his food.

But almost immediately Toribio returned to the subject: "And what did the Cantabrians do?"

"The Cantabrians? Well, they were friendly with the Romans for a long time, but then—and you know this better than me because you were taught it at Amaya—the Roman Empire came to an end and that race of Gauls arrived . . . the Goths, I mean".

"And then?"

"Then the Cantabrians refused to change their laws and mix with them, much less fight for them or pray to their God! So they resisted until they were defeated by King Liuvigild".

"When was that?"

"When they took Amaya, in the days of my great-great grandfather. And now I wager you'll ask me the year!"

"It was in AD 574, father, or so I learned at Amaya", said Toribio, taking him by surprise.

"You little devil, you were stringing me along all the time! You already knew all the answers."

"Only that one. But forgive me, I wanted to test your knowledge".

"The nymphs of the Deva eat you alive!", snorted his father. "I'd do better not to try and compete with you. You know too much for your own good, but listen to me: ignorant though I may be, I am still your father and much older than you, and there are still plenty of things I can teach you!"

Toribio laughed.

"Enough of your questions", concluded his father, observing the sun. "It's time we moved on; it must be after midday."

So saying, and grumbling to himself in the Autrigonian dialect, he picked up the cloth, shook it and walked over to his horse. Toribio followed and they set off again. The sky was a cloudless blue. The standing wheat, already knee high, undulated to the rhythm of the gusting sirocco.

Ten miles further on they came to a tall rock. The track wound round it and it was impossible to see what was beyond. Toribio heard the sound of wheels and the shouts of drivers getting nearer. When they had rounded the rock, Hernando signalled to his son.

"The Via Agrippa!", he exclaimed with satisfaction.

The sight took Toribio's breath away. Here it was at last, the great Roman road, an expanse of smooth paving slabs stretching away endlessly.

The din of cart and wagon wheels filled the air, interrupted now and again by the swift hoof-beats of couriers' horses.

The driver of a mule-drawn caravan saw them, halted his beasts and gestured to them to join him.

"Sir knight! Won't you buy one of these garments?", he shouted.

"No, merchant, we have all we need for our journey", replied Judge Hernando, edging his horse closer, despite its nervousness at the sudden change of scenery.

"Don't worry about your mount. This road is well suited to horses' hooves. He'll soon settle down".

"I hope you are right, because our horses are mountain-bred and quite unfamiliar with these flat lands", said Hernando, trying to quiet the animal.

"In what direction are you going?"

"To King Liuvigild's Bridge. Do you come from those parts by any chance?"

"The good Lord bless you. We came that way this morning. We had intended to go to Porto Blendio, but the guards at the Tower would not let us through. They are stopping everybody, on Count Sancho's orders. Didn't you know?"

"I've heard there were towers and patrols, but I did not think the rules were so strict. What then is the Count of San Emeterio demanding of travellers?"

"Only a travel pass, but if you haven't got one, you might as well forget it! The guards won't even discuss the matter, but dig the end of their pikes in your backside to send you on your way".

"Good heavens, what can have got into *domnus* Sancho? Isn't he busy enough counting his money?

The merchant laughed.

"What you say is true, sir knight, but you know what . . . with this new war with the Arabs, they do not trust anyone, not even poor wayfarers such as ourselves".

"What war are you talking about? Not the one going on in Galicia, I suppose, or why would they be stopping people travelling in this direction?"

"Galicia? You must be joking . . . Don't you know the Arabs are everywhere nowadays? Good sir, what planet do you come from?"

Hernando found the merchant's tone disrespectful, but there was nothing he could do about it. The man was not one of his retainers, still less a slave . . . but a freeman like himself.

"Where do you come from, sir knight?"

"Certainly not from another planet, dear textile merchant!", said the Judge, entering into the spirit of witty repartee.

"It is obvious, your honour, that you are accustomed to command. It is clear from the fine stone you wear round your neck and the lion on your shield. But if you do not want to tell me, at least buy one of my garments. I've some magnificent ones, newly arrived from Aquitaine, imported only last week."

"My old tunic will do me fine . . . but tell me, merchant, what do you know of this war?", asked the judge, worried by the situation the other had mentioned.

"You are asking too much of me, sir knight. I only know these Arabs are everywhere. Soon, it seems, they will be up here, too. You're not one of them I hope?"

"Do I look like an enemy, or do you take me for a Vasconian?"

"Very funny. I like knights who enjoy a joke. Who are you then? A messenger of Count Sancho? If that's the case, you needn't worry about me and my family . . . We have always been good servants of Judge Aurelio, the one from Flaviobriga, his nephew."

Hernando seemed irked by the mention of this name and looked askance at the merchant.

"No, my good man . . .", he replied, lowering his voice. "I am Hernando of Valle de Autrigonia and this is my son."

The merchant was silent. Only then did he understand the meaning of all those lions.

"Forgive me, then, and curse my loose tongue", he said, changing his attitude.

Hernando continued to scowl at him and the other turned pale.

"I forgive you, do not fear. I'm not here to cut off your head . . . but get out of here! You've obviously upset your wife", he said, indicating the woman who was prodding at her husband from the footboard of the wagon.

The merchant apologised again and whipped up his mules, setting them in motion. The pair let the caravan pass and resumed their journey, Hernando delighted to have got one over on the merchant.

By the ninth hour they were in the vicinity of King Liuvigild's Bridge. From a mile away they could make out the outline of the guard tower, a square wooden structure rising austerely in front of it. Meanwhile, the Via Agrippa had become increasingly crowded: queues of caravans and travellers had formed in the direction they were going, and the horses were again restless. Hernando and Toribio drew up behind a hay cart, waiting their turn to pass. The sight of the approaching tower reminded Hernando of the stories he had heard about Sancho, who enjoyed a somewhat mixed reputation. Sancho was a cousin of Duke Petro, but the two of them had never really seen eye to eye. Sancho was stinking rich, as everyone knew. He ruled over the city of San Emeterio, or rather Portus Victoriae, the ancient Roman port, from which ships sailed to all the Gaulish ports and valuable cargoes were received from Vasconia, Aquitaine and Britain.

The Count also owned estates throughout northern Cantabria, from the port of Flaviobriga to the borders of Vasconia, and as far as the valley of the Nanmasa, which flowed into the sea beyond Porto Vereasueca, nearly in the Asturias. As a result, he ruled over the tribes of the Congani and Salaeni, who lived between the Pas and Bishaya river valleys, and also the ancient Blendii, who still lived in the mountains from which they derived their name, in the very centre of the region. Despite his great wealth, however, Sancho never seemed content and had often been at odds with his cousin, when Petro still had the status of count.

Everyone knew the outcome of the dispute over Juliobriga, the town the Romans had founded on the banks of Lake Ebro, which Sancho laid claim to because the territory had formerly belonged to the Blendii, who were now under his rule. There seemed to be no solution. The affair dragged on for years, until King Ergica put an end to it at the fifteenth Council of Toledo, decreeing that all of Cantabria south of Mons Vindius, and therefore the entire basin of the Ebro, was the preserve of Count Petro, while Sancho must be content with the territories to the north of it. Sancho had been obliged to eat humble pie, and for a time had not troubled anybody.

Meanwhile, Petro, on the strength of his military achievements in the wars against the Vasconians, had been appointed duke and had therefore risen above his cousin. And because Petro was not vindictive by nature, nor greedy like Sancho, he had given his cousin a free hand to do what he wanted in his own lands, and had never interfered in the administration of customs duties in his ports. But Sancho had not lost the itch that possessed

him and, some years later, tried to persuade Petro to cede the jurisdiction of Valle de Autrigonia to his nephew Aurelio, Judge of Flaviobriga. Petro understood that Sancho was attempting, once again, to extend his power over the Ebro Valley, given that Valle de Autrigonia was the Cantabrian territory closest to the borders of Vasconia and the Ebro was only a day's ride away over the Pomar Pass.

Petro therefore refused. Legal jurisdiction over the valley had always belonged to the family of Hernando, a true Autrigonian, under the banner of the lion, and since Hernando had always been a loyal brother-in-law of the Duke there was no reason to treat him badly just to fall in with his cousin's family favouritism. Sancho had eaten humble pie once again but, when Hernando learned about it, he had flown into a rage.

He had blocked all his roads, obliging merchants coming up the Ebro valley to pass through Vasconian territory if they wanted to reach Flaviobriga, and vice versa.

Given the not very friendly character of the Vasconians, the affair had caused such disturbance throughout eastern Cantabria that, a month later, at the urging of his nephew Aurelio, who was losing out on customs duties, Sancho sent a messenger to Hernando bearing the apologies of his family and inviting him to a banquet at his palace. Hernando accepted the apologies, but declined to attend the banquet. Since then he had had no more trouble from the Count of San Emeterio, and everybody, especially the merchants of the region, lived in fear of the crusty but highly respected Judge of Valle de Autrigonia.

The hay cart was ordered over to the left-hand side of the road by a guard. Hernando and Toribio had already dismounted and were now standing in front of the guardhouse.

"Travel pass!", demanded a soldier not wearing a helmet, his breastplate dusty with the lamellae unfastened. He was visibly tired and impatient for his shift to end so that he could go off duty and get some rest.

"We haven't got a pass. We have come from Valle de Autrigonia. I am Judge Hernando and this is my son Toribio", replied the man with the plume of crow's feathers, holding his horse by the reins.

The soldier looked at him, perplexed, then shouted over to the guardhouse. Three more guards armed with pikes emerged and quickly surrounded them.

"Are you Vasconians?", asked the soldier, tension written on his face.

"As much Vasconians as the cow which gave birth to an idiot like . . .".

Toribio interrupted him, his voice overriding his father's.

"We are Cantabrians, like you. We haven't a pass because we come from the district of Autrigonia, which depends directly on the Duke of Amaya . . . and we are heading for the Asturias at his invitation."

The soldier, still irritated by Hernando's half-formulated insult, cursed and grumbled in his own dialect and returned to the guardhouse. An older man soon came out to them, his armour in better order, but again without a helmet. Adopting a more courteous demeanour, he questioned them again. Then, persuaded by Toribio's words, and having noted the lion emblems, he allowed them to pass.

Thus father and son crossed the cold waters of the Rio Pas by King Liuvigild's Bridge and set their course for Pico Dobra, which rose up in the distance, against a sky made red by the rays of the setting sun.

They were very tired, but Hernando wanted to put his mind at rest. He needed to pray to his ancient god, otherwise this whole episode would end in disaster, and Hernando had experienced quite enough disasters in the course of his life.

CHAPTER IV

THE CULT OF ERUDINO

Having crossed King Liuvigild's Bridge, father and son rode on along the Via Agrippa, which now climbed into the coastal mountains, making for Porto Blendio.

Along the paved carriageway, they came across groups of men in red tunics and black woollen cloaks, shod in leather footwear. Some were leading donkeys carrying their families: the women dressed in pink and decked with flowers, the children barefoot, hanging on for dear life.

"Who are these people?", asked Toribio.

His father smiled and whispered: "They are Congani, Toribio, the natives of these valleys."

Toribio rode on, observing the poor peasant farmers who seemed exhausted, as if they had come a great distance. "Are they refugees, too?"

"No, probably not. Maybe they have been to pray on Pico Dobra and are now on their way home", answered his father, who was also intrigued by the long, silent procession.

Dusk was falling and already they could make out the heights of Pico Dobra, the mountain sacred to the local tribes, their Olympus, which neither Romans nor Goths had ever tried to desecrate. At the eleventh hour, with the light beginning to fade, Hernando slowed his horse to a walk and took a mountain trail which branched off to the left. The two rode on slowly, through woods of ash, oak and hornbeam, then firs and the occasional pine, until they arrived, tired out, at an arid pass, sparsely covered in juniper bushes.

It was cold and they wrapped their cloaks around them. They were hungry but could not afford to be profligate with their provisions. Except for the deep breathing of their horses, all around them a profound silence reigned, as if they had travelled far back in time.

Hernando pointed in a new direction and Toribio followed him obediently along a narrow path covered in dry leaves that clung to the edge of a dark chasm. In a little while, the pair came to a stone archway,

apparently ages old, covered all over in thick moss. At this point Hernando stopped.

"It is time to rest. Let's turn the horses loose and sleep here. Tomorrow at dawn I will make my petitions. You can pray to your own god, if you wish, but take care . . . This is Erudino's house; try not to irritate him with your false beliefs."

Toribio dismounted and stretched his legs. Then, after drinking a little milk and eating a slab of bread and honey, he lay down to one side of the archway, sheltering himself with his shield. Night had fallen and the sky was bright with stars. From far below them came the faint sound of breaking waves.

Toribio was awakened by the singing of some Conganian girls, coming down the avenue that led to the altar. His father was nowhere to be seen. He jumped up in alarm, but was immediately reassured. The horses, Asfredo and Ederedo, were still there. The girls walked past him, laughing and greeting him as if they were his sisters. A kind of family love was in the air, reminding Toribio of the years he had spent with his mother. Choking with emotion, he looked round for his father, but he was not there.

So Toribio passed through the archway and found himself on an avenue of white pebbles, flanked on either side by antique marble columns. He walked slowly, as the voices of the girls faded away behind him and the sun, which had just risen, appeared on the horizon at the far end of the avenue. He came to a round platform and there found the diminutive figure of his father, his face to the ground before an altar of white marble. There was no idol, no statue, no graven image—only space, time and a man at prayer.

Toribio was moved by the sight and silently offered a prayer to the Virgin. His father was aware of his presence, but did not allow himself to be distracted. The sun was rising and, far off, Toribio became aware of the sea, the endless sea he had heard about as a child but had never yet seen. The awesome sight took his breath away. He suddenly felt he owed respect to his cantankerous pagan father. He had been badly mistaken: this, too, was faith and he was bound to admit it.

"Father", he said, breaking in on his meditation.

"What do you want", came the reply. "Can't you see I am praying?"

"Father", continued Toribio. "Forgive my arrogance. Now I have seen you here praying to your god, I understand that I have been too quick to criticise you . . . Forgive me!".

He was on the point of tears. To comfort him, his father stroked his head. It was years since he had done so.

"Kneel down and pray with me", he said. "We will need the favour of heaven if we are to get out of this safe and sound. And pray too for our tribes, that one day their grandchildren may live in a better world."

Toribio wept and prayed in silence for at least an hour. Then the sky clouded over and they heard thunder approaching.

"Let's go. Erudino has heard enough of our prayers", said Hernando with a worried expression. The storm was getting nearer and a strong wind was blowing up. With difficulty, they made their way back down the avenue, the gusts whistling between the cold marble columns. They were completely alone.

It began to pour with rain and darkness descended. The pair were unable to find the entrance to the avenue. It seemed to go on for ever. Then, suddenly, they were back at the archway, but the horses had gone. The archway was unlike the one they had come through earlier. This one was higher, and magnificently gilded, as if new. They made their way through it and came to the threshold of a cave. On a stone, at a slight angle at one side of the entrance, were inscribed the words: "*Beati ultimi, quod eorum regnum coeli est*". They entered, cold and soaked to the skin, and became aware of a faint light at the far end. The sound of a metal on metal grew louder as they advanced. They made their way down a tunnel and finally emerged into a vast cavern. In the middle stood a granite furnace, from which issued an orange-coloured liquid. Before it an old man, tall and muscular, stripped to the waist, with a fine head of hair and a long white beard, was forging a cross. The two gazed at him in wonder. What could a blacksmith—and such a blacksmith—be doing up here?

"I have been waiting for you, Hernando and Toribio from Valle de Autrigonia", said the old man, smiling with the unspoilt innocence of a child.

"How do you know our names?", asked Hernando.

"I have known them since the day of your birth, and I know those of your fathers, grandfathers and ancestors", replied the other, continuing to hammer the molten metal.

"Who are you?", asked Hernando in amazement.

"My name is Jacobus and I come from Galilee", replied the old man, with total assurance.

"You are a Jew, then?", asked the Judge.

"Yes, if by Jews you mean the race of Abraham", he replied. "No, if you mean those Pharisees who crucified my Lord Jesus", he continued, fixing his eyes on the cross he was creating with an expression of sadness.

"I am confused by your words, old man", said Hernando.

A smile returned to the saint's lips and he pointed them to a stone bench beside the furnace. Then, while continuing to work the incandescent cross on a huge anvil, he went on:

"Is it important to know where I come from, if you yourselves are not even sure of belonging to this people?"

"But we know very well that we are Autrigonians from Cantabria", replied Toribio.

The old man looked at the lad, still smiling.

"My dear Toribio, your faith is as solid as this anvil, but don't let your words run ahead of your thoughts", he said calmly. "Now sit down and listen to me; I have a lot to tell you."

The two of them, spellbound by the serenity of the old man, settled down on the bench and crossed their arms.

These were the words of that blacksmith, who had appeared from nowhere and already knew their names:

"In truth I tell you, brothers, that no man can boast of belonging to any race, since the Eternal Father appointed the place of our birth and gave us a sense of belonging to that place in accordance with his will. And the only race that matters in this world is that of his children, whom he desires to be brothers and sisters and to love one another until the day when all sufferings shall end."

This reminded Toribio of the sermons of Bishop Fruttuoso, whom he had so often heard preach in the basilica of Santa Eufemia at Amaya, in the company of Valerio. But these words seemed even more pure, as if uttered by a soul blessed for all eternity.

"At one time, the Father created the race of men and, in his infinite love, gave them this world and, to each, everything necessary to enjoy life in peace and live in harmony with his neighbour. And so he scattered his children between Gog and Magog, and between the lands of the rising and the setting sun. And he made them different in skin and hair colour, and in the form of eyes, nose and mouth, but identical in other respects,

so that they would be both unique and the same. Then he created different languages, tones of voice and gestures, so that they would recognise those born in one and the same place and would treat them with the same love with which they loved themselves. And so he gave to the peoples of the North fair hair and skin and blue eyes, and to the peoples of the South dark complexions and brown eyes; to the former a more guttural form of speech and to the latter a softer, more mellow utterance. He gave pink and white complexions to the peoples of the West, and olive-yellow skins to those of the East; to the former more mobile features and to the latter almost impassive expressions. In all respects, he made them a family of creatures more beautiful than all the animals and plants he had created on Earth."

Then he continued sadly:

"But some of the angels became jealous and revolted, determined to destroy this wonderful plan."

"You mean Lucifer and the fallen angels?", interrupted Toribio.

"Yes, Toribio. Lucifer had no love of us humans, nor of our womenfolk, because he thought we had robbed him of his rightful place.

"And then?", asked the young man, while Hernando appeared totally perplexed.

"Then Lucifer began to confuse our thoughts and to incite one people against another, so that we began to destroy one another."

"Why? Could he not have simply destroyed us with all his demons?", objected Hernando, sceptical as always.

Jacobus looked at him and shook his head.

"That was the only way he could do it, because the Father would never have allowed the Devil to attack us against our will. The only way he could succeed was by subtly taking advantage of the Free Will the Father had decreed for us . . ."

Hernando fell silent.

"Knowing us to be in danger", continued Jacobus, "the Father sent many prophets, but most men remained deaf to their words or soon forgot them, and so in the end He decided to take the form of a man and came to this Earth as Jesus, to put us on our guard and bring us salvation. But Lucifer discovered his plan and managed to set so many men and women against him, making him out to be a false prophet, that they finally crucified him!".

Jacobus paused, then continued:

"But there he overreached himself, because Jesus rose from the dead and his apostles recorded his words and have borne and will bear his cross from century to century, to the last days of this present world."

"But that is the Gospel, good sir", exclaimed Toribio.

"And so it was written by our brothers Johannes, Matthaeus, Luca and Marcus, but now I am telling you

things that have not been written down."

The old man took the cross from the anvil and his face was bathed in light, and went on:

"When he learned of the resurrection of Jesus, Lucifer unleashed twelve demons from hell, who set about hunting down the apostles, seeking them out in every corner of the earth. But the demons were never able to find them: angels sent by Jesus revealed when and where the demons would catch up with them."

Toribio and his father suddenly felt exhausted, closed their eyes and began to see images of terrible battles.

"Twelve were the nails of the cross, twelve the apostles, twelve the demons to find them", continued Jacobus, "and twelve was the number of the gems Johannes found at the foot of his bed when he woke from his dream of the Apocalypse: onyx, jasper, ruby, emerald, sapphire, alabaster, agate, lapis-lazuli, jet, heliotrope, coral and diamond. These stones represent the twelve nails of the cross and each must play its part once in human history. Each of these twelve events coincides with an attack of the devil, which the apostles must forestall. And at such moments, assuming the demons fail, the gemstones become nails again and are planted in the earth to mark the irresistible march of love, until the day of the Last Judgement."

Then, looking directly into their eyes, he concluded:

"But the demons will do all in their power to find them!"

The two men from Valle were frightened by these words.

"And when will these twelve events happen?", asked Hernando.

"Two have already taken place", replied Jacobus. "The Onyx of Petrus marked Constantine's victory over Maxentius at Saxa Rubra, and the new emperor's edict bringing the persecution of Christians to an end. Philippus' Jasper played its part in the great battle of the Cataulanian Fields, when Franks, Burgundians and Visigoths joined forces with the Romans of General Aetius, the last great warrior of antiquity, to stop Attila, whom many referred to as the Scourge of God."

Jacobus fixed his gaze on them for a moment. Hernando and Toribio were wide-eyed at the mention of those famous names, but the old man smiled and went on:

"Now the Third Event is upon us and it is the turn of the Ruby." So saying, he opened a small leather pouch attached to his belt.

"Look brothers, see how it shines", he urged them, as the softest red radiance was released from the depths of the bag and gradually began to penetrate and caress every corner of the cavern.

The pair were overpowered by a sense of childish wonder. Jacobus then laid the cross in a crucible and placed the ruby at its centre. The stone was gently embraced by the gold, as if the noble metal were in awe of it. Then the old man picked up the cross with his bare hands. The others were amazed that he appeared not to be burned.

"So you are the Apostle Jacobus?", asked Toribio feverishly.

"Yes, brother, and I am here to give you this cross. It is your task to carry it until the time of the great battle that will soon be fought in this corner of the Earth, at this moment in History, and which will forever signify the salvation of the Church!"

"What do you mean, Apostle Jacobus? Why have you chosen me, a man of no significance, unworthy even to listen to your words?", said Toribio, weeping on his knees in front of the saint.

"Because you, Toribio Del Valle, are a young man of pure and proven faith, and this cross cannot be held in impure hands . . . But have a care: the demons will do all they can to take it from you and to frustrate us. Therefore, when you are in danger, you must recite the prayer your mother Goswinta taught you on her death-bed."

"The prayer of Akathistos?", asked the young man, caught up in the memory of those sad days of his childhood.

"The very one, dear Toribio", replied the apostle. "But take care not to discuss it with anyone, except your father and the firstborn of your race."

Hernando was visibly moved, but did not dare to speak.

"And do not let any fear take possession of you", continued Saint Jacobus. "You will be protected by golden angels and a great red lion at every difficult stage in your mission."

He then looked at them with love burning in his eyes. "I must leave you here now. Always remember my words and may Jesus bless you forever!"

At this point, the pair felt a warm breath sweep over them and they fell into a deep slumber.

When they awoke, they were at the foot of the archway where they had stopped the previous evening. Asfredo and Ederedo were there waiting for them, rested and well fed. The sun was already high over Pico Dobra and there was not a soul in sight. Nothing but silence.

CHAPTER V

PORTO VEREASUECA

Father and son exchanged glances, reduced to silence by what they had seen and heard. The sun flashed on the silver band that encircled Toribio's head. His father's face was tense, expressing consternation. They stood face to face, shields raised and rights hands on the hilts of their swords, as if ready for a test of strength. They held each other's eyes for a long time, then Hernando averted his gaze, looking westwards towards the open sea. He could not make sense of it all.

"A dream . . .", he murmured slowly, "I hope it was just a dream."

"A dream, father? How do you explain this, then!?", exclaimed Toribio anxiously.

The Ruby Cross lay on the rock in front of him, the letters alpha and omega shining out from its golden arms.

"Leave it there!", said his father. "It is an ancient form of magic, and much greater than we are!"

"Magic? We both saw that apostle and heard what he told us. Since when have two people dreamed exactly the same dream?"

"But it must be magic. How could an apostle be still living after seven hundred years?", insisted his father, even more disturbed than his son.

"Don't say any more, father. This time I'm not going to obey you. *Sanctus* Jacobus has given me this task and I shall carry it through to completion", replied Toribio with determination.

Little remained of the youthful son who had set out with Hernando. His voice was clearer, his gaze deeper, his expression more confident.

"What is happening to you, Toribio? Are you under a spell? For Erudino's sake, do you really know what you are saying?"

Toribio was silent, lost in thought for a moment. Then he planted his feet firmly on the ground and threw out his chest. "Yes, father, I do know. I want to go ahead with this. I have had enough of your Erudino and all these gods who never actually do anything."

Hernando showed his disagreement with a grimace, but did not have it in him to reprove his son. He was confused, shocked, dazed.

"I think I am too old to correct you", he said slowly. "Do as you will. That man seemed a good fellow, after all", he conceded, avoiding the eyes of his son.

The two remained silent for a while, contemplating the sky, the sea and the earth. Then Toribio took up the cross, kneeled down, kissed the ruby and, crossing his arms over his chest, prayed in Latin.

Rejoice, eternally Virgin Bride!
Rejoice, radiance that enlightens men's souls;
Rejoice, joy of all generations;
Rejoice, dwelling of the infinite God;
Rejoice, One at whom the angels marvel.
Rejoice, voice of the Apostles never silent;
Rejoice, awesome slayer of demons;
Rejoice, defence against invisible enemies;
Rejoice, through you the curse is broken.
Rejoice, because you restore men's souls;
Rejoice, because you bring reconciliation where there is discord;
Rejoice, because you plundered the kingdom of the dead;
Rejoice, because through you comes the blazing light.
Rejoice, eternally Virgin Bride!

Hernando felt a cry of pain rise in his throat, then tears gradually began to run down his rugged cheeks and beard, while his knees gave way under a great weight of nostalgia. He bowed before Toribio and, struggling to hold back his sobs, said: "May your god bless you, son. If this is the will of the woman of my life, may it be done forever!"

At that moment, a white bird, maybe a pelican, rose in flight from the apex of the archway, soared and circled over them twice, then headed towards the open sea, disappearing into the distance.

"Amen!", said Toribio, who had observed the bird's behaviour.

Then, using a strip of leather, he tied the cross round his neck, slipped it under his tunic and mounted his horse.

"Won't it weigh you down on the journey?", asked Hernando.

"You wouldn't believe it, father, but it is light as a feather", replied the young man.

His father made no reply and mounted his own horse. Then they made their way back down the mountain, recognising the cliffs, woods and precipices they had passed the evening before.

But before they reached the junction with the Via Agrippa, at a sharp bend in the trail, they were surprised by the sudden appearance of a monk, riding an old tawny-coloured warhorse.

"For the love of heaven, I've found you at last!", shouted the man, his greeting echoed by a neigh from his horse.

"Valerio!", exclaimed Toribio, "What are you doing up here? What miracle is this?"

"I've been searching for you for the last two days. At Valle they told me about your mission. I was afraid of being too late."

"Too late for what, monk?", asked Hernando ungraciously.

Valerio assumed a casual attitude. His smooth-shaven face relaxed, though sweat continued to pour from his olive-skinned forehead with its long fringe of black hair. His amber-coloured eyes were determined but gentle on either side of his well-proportioned nose.

A Levanter, Valerio was not easily upset by others' rudeness. But now he seemed strangely serene, in a way Toribio had never seen before. The monk raised his eyes to the old Iberian warrior who was scowling down at him from astride his horse.

"Too late to pray with you", he replied mysteriously.

"Pray with us for what?", demanded the Judge.

"For the salvation of your family, the glory of Hispania and the victory of the Church", replied Valerio, a luminous smile spreading over his face.

Hernando raised his eyes in exasperation but made no reply.

"Father, let him come with us! He's my friend, and the three of us will be better able to defend ourselves from danger on our journey, won't we?", urged Toribio.

Hernando shook his head. "So be it then, Toribio. I see no end to this time of changes . . . but I'll have to resign myself", he returned, continuing to shake his head. "But listen to me, monk", he continued, "cut the cackle and make sure you gee-up that draught animal of yours; I don't want to lose any time!"

"Please don't refer to my friend Witisclo in those terms. He may not be as fast as your mount, but he will go many a league without tiring, and he doesn't require a lot of provender. He was recommended by the groom at San Joanne", replied the monk.

"Who? Old Fabriano?", asked Hernando. The monk nodded sagely.

"Follow us, then. I know Fabriano, and he knows his business", concluded the Judge.

Thus the three joined forces and descended at a good pace towards the Via Agrippa, Toribio turning in the saddle from time to time to see if his friend was keeping up. But Valerio's nag was very obedient and, despite its awkward gait, trotted along pleasantly enough. When they reached the Roman road, they found even more traffic than the day before: endless queues of caravans, wayfarers and family groups decked out in a whole range of yellows, oranges, reds and pinks.

There were still a lot of Congani in their long black cloaks, but also families of Plentusi, in purple clothing and amaranthine cloaks, and Blendii, in orange-coloured robes and light blue sashes. Renowned for their beauty were the Salaenian women, with their golden-brown skin, doe-like eyes and long straight hair gathered at the nape of the neck with bronze buckles. They loved flowers—hazel, peach, wild plum and rowan—, with which they adorned their delicate necks and shapely round breasts. With all the gesturing, talking, shouting and unrestrained laughter, it seemed like a day-long celebration.

"By all the demons of Cantabria!", exclaimed Hernando, "Where have all these people come from?"

"I don't know, father. I've never seen so many people all together before", replied his son.

The two had reined their horses in and Valerio caught up with them.

"Have you ever seen such beautiful women ?", enthused the monk, thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Do you know what is going on, Valerio?", asked Toribio.

"Surely you haven't forgotten? It's the end of April, and they are coming from all over the place to the market at Porto Vereasueca", came the reply.

Hernando shook his head again. "A fair was all we needed . . . They'll slow us down for sure."

And indeed the three of them had to rein in their horses frequently to avoid trampling the throng of their fellow-travellers. But at least it gave Toribio an opportunity to talk with Valerio. He could hardly contain the urge to tell him about the meeting with Saint Jacobus, but he did not want to annoy his father, who was already strung taught as a bow on account of the frequent hold-ups.

"You know, Valerio, yesterday something wonderful happened up there, on the mountain, but perhaps I'd better not tell you about it here on the road."

Valerio's answer surprised him: "I know everything, Toribio, the apostle visited me, too, in a dream, and that's why I am here."

Toribio felt a thrill of excitement run up his spine and barely managed to keep hold of the reins. His father was too far ahead to have heard Valerio's words and so he edged Asfredo closer to Witisclo.

"What did you say?", he asked incredulously.

"We'll talk about it this evening before turning in, when your old pagan is asleep", replied the monk with a smile. "We are intimately caught up in the will of God!"

Toribio experienced a sense of overwhelming happiness, which thrilled him to the core. He said no more but dug his heels into Asfredo's sides to catch up with the older man ahead of him. Meanwhile, the road had levelled out. They were passing cultivated fields and villas on hillsides planted with rows of apple trees. Farm-workers' huts were build in lines along ditches and the occasional canals. Clearly, they were approaching a large town.

Suddenly, the men from Valle heard shouts of a different kind behind them, as if sharp, urgent orders were being given. They turned and saw the crowds of travellers making way as a pair of chariots passed swiftly between them. The chariots were followed by a coach, with all its windows closed, making it impossible to see who was inside.

"Make way. Make way, you plebs!", bawled a guard, levelling his pike to keep people at a distance.

The coach rumbled noisily past, almost brushing against them and causing the horses to neigh with alarm.

"Rotten bastard!", exclaimed Hernando, trying to recover his hold on the reins, but the vehicle was already far away. He just managed to make out the coat-of-arms: two towers and the profile of Neptune on the reverse.

"Curse you and your money!". The words escaped him, attracting a dirty look from the last soldier escorting the coach.

"Who is it, Father?", asked Toribio, his heart still beating fast.

"That pirate Sancho! Who else could it be, brushing ordinary people out of the way with such arrogance?", replied the Judge, continuing to curse under his breath.

"Will he also be on his way to meet Pelayo?", asked the youngster.

"I think so", answered his father. "So much the better . . . In such a hurry, he'll arrive before dawn and we won't be bothered with him at

Vereasueca this evening. I have absolutely no desire to mix with that third-rate aristocrat!"

Toribio fought to keep a straight face. His father's anger with the world at large was often almost more than he could handle.

The three of them reached the port city as dusk was falling. Torches were already lit on the glacis walls protecting the entrance to the city. They passed through the gate unchallenged. The guards' attention was taken up with a group of tipsy farmers, with whom they were exchanging pleasantries. The lightly armed youngster on duty at the entrance barely gave them a glance, waved them on, then made his way over to his laughing colleagues to satisfy his own curiosity. Thus the three travellers entered the ancient Roman city, whose streets stretched out before them, satisfyingly clean, orderly and well-lit. Hernando searched for the inn recommended by his retainer Decio and, having asked the way of two lads returning home for their evening meal, had no difficulty in guiding them to the place.

So they came to Ennio's inn. The landlord, short and full-bellied, with square shoulders and a bald head, welcomed them warmly at the mention of Decio. He ordered a slave to stable and feed their horses, then showed them to their rooms and commanded another slave to prepare the tubs of hot water for their baths.

When they were thoroughly washed and scrubbed, the three were bidden to come down for dinner.

The dining hall was enormous and packed with customers. There was a magnificent circular hearth, from which the smoke exited through a large hole in the ceiling. The mosaic flooring featured the head of Bacchus, surrounded by half-naked maidens and shepherds playing pan-pipes. Around the smoke-blackened walls stood some twenty tables, covered with white cloths and laden with all kinds of delicious fare: roast hogs-heads, legs of lamb, joints of venison, and bowls full of salad, beans, lentils and olives.

There were several jars of wine and, in the middle of every table, a barrel from which the customers served themselves, using long ladles to fill terracotta tankards, cylindrical in shape but wider at the base.

"What's that they're drinking?", asked Toribio, attracted by the green, foaming appearance of the liquid."

"It's called cider, stranger", replied a diner sitting beside him in a pleasant Asturian accent, and offered him a full tankard to drink from.

Toribio sipped the liquid for the first time in his life, watched suspiciously by his father, while Valerio, who had already tasted the fermented apple drink, smiled knowingly.

"It's good this soda . . . cedar . . . ?", he muttered

"Cider, Toribio, cider", laughed Valerio, coming to his aid.

Hernando tried it, too, and a look of satisfaction spread over his face. The three then settled down to eat voraciously, not without introducing themselves to their neighbours and exchanging jokes and sagacious comments with those sitting across the table. All of them were men, mostly Cantabrian, but their dialects differed widely. The man who had offered Toribio the cider was called Xabel, a member of the Avaraginian tribe, who lived on the border with the Asturias, on the banks of the River Nanmasa. He wore a patched green robe and a threadbare grey cloak, and he had come to buy cattle at the fair.

Hernando, meanwhile, conversed with an old man seated opposite, all skin and bones in a humble tunic of yellow wool. He was of the Coniscian tribe, almost a neighbour as far as Hernando was concerned, and the Judge was soon telling him that the valour of their chief, Virone, was a byword in the valleys of Autrigonia. Abano—for this was his name—almost burst with pride at the respect in which this well-dressed man held his tribe, and the pair were soon firm friends. The Del Valle folk quickly became the centre of interest of the whole table and, as the drink began to flow, Hernando held them in thrall with ever more imaginative hunting stories.

After three barrels of cider had been consumed, words gave way to Cantabrian choral singing and jokes about the curvaceous figures of the Hispano-Roman women. Hernando was drunk by this time, the effect of the cider combining with his weariness from the long journey. When his eyelids began to droop towards his plate, Valerio and Toribio urged him to retire for the night.

"Don't you dare touch me, Byzantine monk, just in case you think you can take advantage of this magic green potion to convert me to Christianity!", said the Judge tartly, making the other Cantabrians, pagans to a man, split their sides with laughter.

Despite Hernando's resistance, they finally managed to haul him off to his room, where he collapsed on an enormous cushion, out for the count.

With the old man safely in bed, Valerio said to Toribio: "We'd better go for a walk. It will clear your head and prepare you for sleep."

Toribio readily accepted the suggestion and the pair slipped out of the inn, still full of people singing to the accompaniment of castanets and tambourines, to stretch their legs and explore the attractive old town.

Unsteady themselves from the effects of the alcohol, they took a narrow street leading downhill, at the end of which they were struck by a gust of salty air.

The magnificent harbour opened up before them. Ships and boats of every kind rode placidly along the quay, illuminated by torches located on the mooring masts.

"Look, Toribio! Look how many ships!", said Valerio, his attention drawn now by the stately prows of biremes from Aquitaine, now by the furled sails of Byzantine acazias, now by the braziers burning on the poops of Roman liburnae.

"You see? Men have never been able to resist the challenge of the sea", said the monk, seeing Toribio awed by the sight of such power and ingenuity.

"And what else do they challenge?", asked the young man, breaking the silence.

"You are really intelligent, Toribio . . . You know very well what and Who they challenge", replied the monk seriously.

The significance of the word "Who" was not lost on Toribio.

"Let's hear about that dream of yours, Valerio. I must know!", he said.

"It happened the night we left San Joanne", began Valerio. "An elderly man with a full white beard and joyful countenance visited me in my dreams and told me about his mission, about you, about the cross, and your lineage . . .".

"Our lineage?", interrupted Toribio.

"Yes, yours", continued Valerio, "the Del Valle lineage, and the twelve gems . . . but . . .", he continued slowly, "I also dreamed of all the sufferings and disasters that will come upon your people in the centuries to come."

"Is it right for me to know?", queried Toribio.

"No, maybe not. It's better I don't tell you about your own people . . . But I will tell you that I saw things both magnificent and terrible. I saw kings come with vast armies and fearless generals fight to the last man . . . persecutions and slaughters . . . cities sacked, children butchered, women assaulted and raped by devils in shining armour . . . bishops and popes betray their flocks and indulge in vice and possessions as if crazed

with drink . . . kings disappear and men without armour take their place, and kill all the aristocrats and divide up kingdoms among them, calling them republics . . . the palaces of nobles besieged by masses of enraged plebeians . . . and wars . . . wars in every corner of the world between soldiers wielding weapons that spat fire . . . and in the skies infernal machines that flew and dropped earthenware pots which blew up, destroying entire cities and leaving enormous holes . . . then two great flashes, like stars falling to earth, that dissolved men, women and children with almond-shaped eyes as if they were candle wax . . . then a long period of peace during which all the men and women shared their work and brought up their children in enormous houses, high as mountains, and travelled in carriages that moved by themselves, and spent their time watching moving pictures, as if by magic, inside a box . . . and there was no more hunger or plagues or other illnesses, and all animals had been tamed, and children were born in glass bulbs . . . , but then two great iron birds struck two towers in their most powerful city and triggered the final war between the peoples of Gog and Magog . . . and finally, only at the very end, the last gem was revealed and I saw the arrival of . . ."

"Of whom?", asked Toribio, bewildered and shaken by these apocalyptic visions.

"The arrival of him . . . the Redeemer!", replied Valerio, by this time in tears.

Toribio was like one turned to stone.

The two were silent for a long time, while around them the only sound was that of waves lapping against the hulls of ships.

"He will return, then?", asked the younger man.

"He will return, Toribio. He will return indeed. Have no fear!", replied Valerio, a smile once again on his lips.

CHAPTER VI

CANGAS DE ONIS

The man in red with the plume of crow's feathers, the boy with the green jerkin and the bluff character in the monk's habit cautiously approached the great stone tower that blocked the road before them, buffeted by the wind off the sea. A wild-looking figure wearing a light-blue tunic under his scale armour, a brown cloak and a crested helmet was waiting for them up there, motionless, a long lance held erect in his right hand. They had reached the Asturian customs post, as the sun entered upon the fourth hour of the day.

"Who goes there? Make yourselves known!", ordered the man, who had a close-trimmed beard and grey hair and was examining them with ice-cold eyes.

The three introduced themselves.

"So you are friends of Pelayo?", asked the old customs officer.

"We are making for Cangas de Onis on the invitation of Petro, Duke of Amaya", added Toribio.

"Amaya?", queried the grim old soldier doubtfully.

The three exchanged glances and suddenly felt as if they were in another world.

"Amaya! Have you never heard of the fine Cantabrian city beyond the mountains to the South?", snorted Hernando.

"Are you Tamarici, then? We don't see many of your kind around these parts", replied the other in surprise.

"We are Cantabrians, no more no less!", snarled the Judge. "How much do you want to let us pass?"

Ignoring his disrespectful question, the customs officer calmly examined their horses from all angles, observed their weapons and shields, noted the habit worn by Valerio, who was watching him patiently, and said: "No duties to pay, you are not merchants. Clearly you are warriors, and this man is a monk. Have you eaten?"

The three let out a sigh of relief.

"At last, language we can understand!", said Valerio with a laugh.

The customs officer joined in.

"Come in, you must be tired. My wife has just baked a batch of bread. The wine will not be up to the standards of Aquitaine, but it's the best we can manage", he said, leaning his lance against the arch of the gateway and ushering them in. They climbed a rickety ladder to the first floor. It was a single room, sparsely furnished: a cupboard, a small table and four stools. Xusta, the customs officer's wife, a plump woman with a generous bosom, received them warmly as a young kid and a couple of hens scuttled out of their way.

Thus the trio lunched in the house of customs officer Xosepe, who told them many things about the Asturias and the two main Asturian tribes: the Paesici, who lived in the western part of the territory, and the Luggoni, who lived in the east. They learned of the misfortunes of the Cilurgini of the west coast, who had already lost Xixon to the Saracens, and the happier situation of the Luggoni of Infiesto, who were better defended by the inhospitable nature of their native mountains. They learned, too, with admiration and respect, of the valour of the Penian and Pembelian tribes of Parres, the fortitude of the Arcadeuni of Onis, the wisdom of the Arnumini of Belenio and the strong sense of justice of the Abilici of Morcín.

But the Asturias were also a land of mystery, peopled in places by creatures of less luminous and irreproachable character!

"Beware of the River Deva!", Xosepe warned them. "It is the haunt of the Xanas. Keep constantly on the move when you are down there, or you will be caught in their magic nets!"

Hernando, remembering the dire warnings of Caelia, was about to make an ironic comment, but Toribio gave him a kick under the table. Only then did the Judge notice something peculiar about Xosepe's face: a black scar on his left cheek-bone.

"You see this?", he said, "I got it from them, They are the most beautiful of women, but watch you don't fall into their clutches. First they seduce you, then they suck the life out of you!"

His wife looked at her guests with an air of resignation.

An hour later, the trio gratefully took leave of the kindly couple and rode on. The scenery had change dramatically. They were now in a landscape of low, undulating hills clothed in dense woods of oak and alder, with a dark and mysterious river running silently beside them to the left

of the trail. The Via Agrippa had come to an end, and the horses seemed content to sink their hooves into real earth once again. Beside them, the Deva was lost from sight now and again behind stunted shrubs and bushes, whose roots disappeared under its waters. At other times it formed wide bends and greenish pools carpeted with water lilies.

It was in following one of these meanders that Toribio heard the sound of distant singing, then the sweet note of a zither, low in tone, issuing from among the greenery of those ancient trees. The voices were those of young women, but the language was incomprehensible to human ears. Toribio felt a slight thrill run through his body and his fingers slowly release their grip on the reins. His horse slackened its pace. The singing became more clearly defined and, among the alders standing by the waterside, the young man became aware of gracefully moving shadows.

As if bewitched, he drew up and dismounted from his horse. He focused his eyes on the moving figures, which seemed to be dancing on the surface of the water. Now he was walking towards them, water up to his knees. They were breathtaking in their beauty: young women with copper-coloured locks falling in waves around the whitest of necks, curvaceous bodies barely concealed by transparent gowns which hid nothing of their pomegranate breasts and well-padded mountains of Venus, richly endowed with soft downy hair.

Toribio felt the blood rush to his head, while his male organ stiffened and reared up with a life of its own.

He was now only a few arms' length from the nearest of them, who danced before him, pushing back her hair to reveal a face worthy of love's goddess, eyes blue as turquoise, lips sharply defined promising the sweetness of honey. He was about to reach out and touch her, when his feet slipped and the waters began to close over his head.

"Damnation! What madness is this?", came the angry voice of his father, as he hauled him up and set him across his horse. Hernando barely managed to lug him to the bank, where they found Valerio anxiously waiting.

"Toribio, let's get out of here!", cried the monk. "Xosepe was right; they are not a figment of the imagination!"

Toribio jumped straight into the saddle and the three of them rode off at a gallop. The Xanas had all but brought about their ruin.

Having covered several miles without even a sideways glance, the three drew up by a great stone, maybe an ancient *petra fixa* for guiding travellers. Some Christian soul had carved upon it an image of the Virgin Mary. Valerio knelt to pray and thanked the Lord for saving them. Hernando looked at his son with an expression of reproach. Toribio could barely grasp what had happened to him, but now he remembered the physical sensations he had experienced for the first time in the presence of those naked, stunningly beautiful women.

"Let's be on our way, monk. Maybe we'll manage to reach our destination before nightfall", grumbled the Judge, breaking in on Valerio's prayers.

In the late afternoon, they arrived at a stone-built Roman bridge with an enormous span, which at last brought them to the right bank of the Deva. Here the road parted company with the river and wound its way into the mountains. They climbed for about ten miles through ash and beech woods, until they reached a church of bright orange marble, on the roof of which a loggia had been erected to house a small bell.

In front of the church they met an old woman, who greeted them warmly.

"Good lady, is this the way to Cangas?", asked the Judge, making the effort to be courteous.

"Indeed it is, strangers. Follow the way-markers by the side of the road. You have not far to go."

The three urged their horses on up the slope. Shortly after, they heard the bell ring and turned to look. The old woman had vanished.

As they rode on, milestones came into view, one after the other, on the north side of the roadway. They were made of stone and each bore the name of an apostle. As they came to the sixth stone, named for Saint Simon, they met a squad of twelve Visigoth horsemen, their steel armour shining brightly and helmets securely fastened. The knights galloped on downhill, ignoring them, the thunder of the horses' hooves drumming in their ears. After the twelfth milestone, the ash woods gave way to a muddy depression, where extensive patches of tall green reeds barely let through the sunlight.

Having emerged from this lush forest, they found themselves facing a strongly built palisade of pointed tree-trunks, surrounded by a moat full of dry leaves and brambles. Following the moat round for a hundred yards

or so, they came to the main gate, crowned by an array of pikes on which were impaled the decomposing skulls and heads of a number of bears. A soldier was watching them from a platform raised immediately behind this macabre display. He asked no questions, but shouted down to those inside and they heard orders being passed along by different voices.

Suddenly, a platoon of guards, clad in coats of chain mail down to the ankles and white surcoats emerged from the gate and surrounded them. The trio uttered not a word, barely concerned by this martial welcome. The platoon of Visigoths escorted them to the centre of a large village, consisting of many wooden huts and the occasional brick-built house, and left them on the threshold of a recently whitewashed building with a main hall and two aisles, roofed with regularly aligned wooden shingles.

A woman of around thirty was waiting for them, surrounded by three servants. She wore a lilac-coloured sleeveless dress and a cream waistcoat. She was tall and broad of shoulder, with an aristocratic bearing. Her face was long and lean, and her sun-tanned cheeks were marked with lines reflecting the events of many years past. She wore her blond hair tied back, but some had escaped to form a fringe at the front. Her eyes were of a calm grey, soft as bees' wax. This was Gaudiosa, wife of Duke Pelayo.

The three had hardly dismounted when the noblewoman rushed forward to embrace Toribio.

"Toribio, son of my good friend Goswinta, I would have recognised you anywhere! You were already handsome as a child; now you would grace the court of a king!"

Toribio was embarrassed by the sheer warmth of her greeting. "*Domna* Gaudiosa, the honour is all mine!", replied the young man, kneeling down and kissing her feet.

"*Domna* Gaudiosa, I pay my respects", chimed in Hernando, also bowing down, but with a slight air of diffidence, given that this was the wife of a man for whom he did not have any great liking.

"Come in, come in, my friends. I have had the best room got ready for you", continued their hostess and, speaking in Latin, she ordered her servants to attend to the guests.

As they crossed the atrium of that majestic, albeit decaying, Roman villa, Gaudiosa explained the arrangements she had made for them.

"Hernando and Toribio, you will lodge in the north-facing room, where I have just had a fire lit. Your bath is ready, too, and my servants will see to

you. For you, monk Valerio, I am preparing the east-facing room, so you will be able to pray in the first light of dawn."

Appreciating such hospitality, Valerio thanked her warmly: "May God bless you sister, but so much solicitude is quite wasted on a poor monk!"

"No, it is due, Valerio. I did not know that you would be coming, but you are Toribio's tutor, and for me he is a son", she replied, remembering she had first met the monk when Pelayo's family were guests, in exile, at Amaya.

"Duke Petro will join us after supper, then tomorrow morning he will introduce you to my husband's court. My husband will not be back until late tonight. They are all up there at the old Legates' Palace discussing plans for this detestable war", explained Gaudiosa.

Hernando now felt more at ease. The noblewoman was gentle in her manners and, above all, had made a point of recalling that she had been a friend of his wife Goswinta. As they were crossing the garden of the peristyle, now barely discernible in the twilight, Toribio noticed a girl sitting on the parapet, between the slender columns of the portico. She was speaking with a younger child and laughing, casting sideways glances towards them.

"Agasinda and Ermesinda, my daughters", said Gaudiosa, who had noticed that Toribio's attention was drawn in their direction.

Toribio continued to watch the girl on the parapet. She was tall and slim, her brown hair hanging loose on her shoulders, with a high forehead like his own, and a splendid pair of chestnut eyes.

She stopped laughing and returned his gaze, with the uncertain look of a fawn sensing that the archer is taking aim. The impression lasted for the merest moment. Toribio, embarrassed, shifted his attention to the rest of the group.

"You will have the chance to become better acquainted tomorrow", said Gaudiosa. "But come along now, or your baths will be cold."

The three followed their hostess, who accompanied them as far as their rooms, leaving the servants with instructions to meet their every need.

The supper they sat down to in the reception room of the villa was frugal. What must once have been a splendid *triclinium*, where imperial legates, provincial governors and wealthy hangers-on had lain on couches to feast and be merry, was now just a large room where they had set up a long beech-wood table on trestles, surrounded by a few chairs and a

number of stools. On the walls it was possible to make out figures of gods and mythological animals, but the colours were dull and faded. The hypocaust under the floor had only just been lit and, despite the season, the cool air coming in through the curtains of the three full-length windows giving onto the peristyle made them shiver. But the Del Valles and Valerio could at last relax after three days of forced riding, while Gaudiosa's butler filled their goblets.

They were sharing their impressions of Vereasueca with the duchess, when rapid, heavy footsteps were suddenly heard approaching the dining-room, then a short brawny silhouette brusquely parted the curtains of the first door onto the peristyle. It was a bear of a man who entered, muffled up in black, his brown robe held in place, below his thrusting belly, by a broad belt with a gold and enamel buckle in the shape of an eagle. His head was bare, revealing short, grey, well-cared-for hair, receding a little at the temples, and a high forehead. His nose was globular and slightly crooked, presiding over a compact bristle-brush moustache. He had roundish cheeks and a broad, prominent chin. His dominant feature was a pair of active, rather bovine eyes, with irises green as emerald.

"Petro! By all the demons of Cantabria, you are here, then?", cried Hernando Del Valle, rising so precipitately as to almost overturn his stool.

"Ahaaah! My old Autrigonian brother! May I swallow a toad, if this is not a moment I have been looking forward to for years!", thundered his brother-in-law in his characteristic baritone.

The pair embraced energetically. "And, my goodness, this must be Toribio! What have you been eating to make you such a strapping lad? Grandma Amagoya's oatmeal pancakes, I'll be bound!", exclaimed the Duke in addressing the young man, who was almost choked with emotion.

"Uncle Petro, it would not be like you to forget those pancakes, would it?", replied Toribio with a laugh.

"And how could I forget the cooking of your father's excellent mother?", continued Petro, without loosing his grip on his brother-in-law's shoulder.

"You are very welcome, dear relatives! Our Duchess has, I hope, followed my instructions in every particular", he said, turning his eyes on Gaudiosa at the head of the table.

"Of course, Petro. I have given them the best room, and my servants are getting another ready for monk Valerio", replied the noblewoman courteously.

"Valerio, of course! Toribio's tutor. So you, too, will be keeping us company. Would you ever have imagined days like these when you were teaching at Amaya?," asked Petro, shaking the monk's hand.

"Never. But such is life: every day we are surprised by providence", answered Valerio.

"What you say is true, man of faith! I realised immediately it must be you, when the guards reported there was a man wearing the habit. Valerio, I feel that your presence will bring us good fortune", thundered the Duke again.

Toribio then understood how Gaudiosa had known they were arriving. It was clear that everyone had been informed of their arrival by his uncle. Otherwise, there was no explaining the absence of security checks at the gate.

Petro bade them sit down again, while Gaudiosa hurriedly ordered the butler to bring another goblet.

The three told the Duke of Amaya something of their adventures over recent days, except for the matter of the cross. Toribio did not want to discuss it with anyone else, and his father certainly preferred to pass over the matter in silence, so as not to be regarded as mad by knights with whom he craved a sense of equal status.

Petro could not resist referring to the virtues of his sister, who had died ten years previously, but, seeing the sadness written on the faces of her husband and son, and the tears of her old friend Gaudiosa, immediately lowered his voice. "Forgive me, all of you. I did not intend to upset you by my lack of sensitivity", he apologised, then raising his eyes to the ceiling: "Goswinta, dear sister, bless us all from up there . . . even your poor blasphemer of a brother!", not realising that all of them were now in tears.

Such was the Duke of Amaya: always of a cheerful disposition, tigerish when wielding a sword but, like many knights in those wild times, totally incapable of understanding the virtue of silence in the painful circumstances of life.

"Enough of melancholy, my friends!", he exclaimed, and the others seemed more than willing to overlook his lack of tact. "We are gathered

here for the glory of Hispania and the Church!", a remark which quickly restored the enthusiasm around his table.

Then the muscular Visigoth informed them of all that was going on, and the Del Valles reported what they had heard from Gunderic.

"Ah, that wolf of Pannonia! I knew his father Giveric, a pure-blooded Visigoth, as sharp of tongue as of sword! But I can vouch for him: I brought up Gunderic myself; he can be trusted to the point of death itself", he said proudly.

Hernando repented again of having at first doubted the qualities of the soldier in question, but was relieved at the thought that he had apologised to him in good time.

He was about to ask his brother-in-law if he, too, had heard the story of the death of King Roderic and the involvement of Bishop Oppa, but Petro did not give him time to get a word in.

"Tomorrow, dear friends, I will present you at the court of Pelayo. Then we shall hear the reports of the Swabian counts on the war in Galicia, and, I hope, a report from Eneko, Count of Calahorra."

"By the wrath of Diana, is that damned Vasconian involved with us in this?", exclaimed Hernando in surprise.

"Don't jump to conclusions, dear brother-in-law! It has been difficult, but in the end

we have managed to get him to bring word from Patriarch Momo . . . Let's hope they will help us . . . They are not having such a great time of it themselves down there . . . Tariq's Berbers and Musa's Arabs, so they have told me, have burned Zaragoza and have already besieged Pamplona twice!".

Serve them right—thought the Judge—that'll teach them to double-cross people.

"But everyone here is keeping an eye on him. His reputation as a trouble-maker is known throughout Hispania . . . In any case, he, too, will have opportunity to speak for himself tomorrow", continued the Duke.

Then, as if making an even more important revelation, he said: "Bishop Astasio will also be coming! Just think, they says he plans to come from Toledo to help us . . . It would seem he knows a great deal, or so I am told, even though I have never met him personally."

"Astasio?", queried Toribio. "That's strange! I've never heard the name before, but maybe he is the new metropolitan who was supposed to

come after the death of Teudisclo . . . The name sounds Greek, perhaps he has been sent from Byzantium."

Hernando rolled his eyes.

"Let's drink then to the health of gorgeous Constantinople!", proposed Petro, raising his goblet with the intention of honouring Valerio's native city.

The others responded willingly enough, though Hernando showed some reluctance. Byzantium was beautiful and powerful enough to merit a toast, but the reputation of the Byzantines was too mixed to arouse much enthusiasm. Nevertheless—he thought—his brother-in-law was a man of the world, and you had to allow him a certain amount of licence.

"Brother-in-law, it would be wise to turn in for the night. I would not want the wine to go to my head like that gut-rot beverage I drank at Vereasueca", said the Judge, provoking general laughter. Petro, by now somewhat merry, rose unsteadily: "Good! As you wish. We shall have opportunity to toast more glorious things, if God is gracious to us."

Gaudiosa accompanied the Duke to the door, commanding a servant to escort him to his residence. Then she returned to her guests and personally accompanied them to their rooms.

Before leaving Toribio, now almost asleep on his feet, she kissed his forehead.

"You don't know how happy I am to have you here with us, son of Goswinta. May the lions of your fathers protect us from all these devils!", she said in an undertone.

The boy nodded his agreement and said goodnight.

Entering the room, he approached his pallet, lit by a tall candlestick standing nearby. His father was already snoring, like a boar in its death throes. The young man undressed silently, blew out the candles, then eased himself under the thick woollen blankets.

Only then did he remember the cross. It was strange, he thought, to have travelled so many miles without ever once handling it. And yet he could feel it well enough under his fingertips. It was warm and gave him a sense of peace. He touched the ruby and immediately fell into a deep slumber.

CHAPTER VII

PELAYO

Duke Petro came to fetch them after breakfast, accompanied by two towering, square-shouldered Visigoth men-at-arms: Liuva and Teudiselo. The pair were wearing the customary coats of mail down to their ankles, but their white tunics were open on their arms, revealing gleaming iron gauntlets. From beneath their pointed helmets and gilded nose-guards stared faces of wild appearance: their long hair and copper-colour beards seemed to have been groomed with a toothless comb; their blue eyes were glassy and livid. Liuva's face was graced with a long scar which closed down his left eye, while Teudiselo had half of one ear cropped. They were brothers, Petro's most trusted lieutenants, for which reason he had brought them with him from Amaya.

When the Duke introduced them to his relatives, the two giants nodded their respect but otherwise remained still as statues. The group moved off towards the old Legates' Palace, an imposing red-coloured building on a small hill. At the entrance, they were saluted by the guards, dressed in similar fashion to the two brothers, and ushered in. They proceeded along a short corridor, its walls decorated with mouldering mosaics, until they came to the threshold of an enormous wooden amphitheatre with at least thirty semicircular tiers of benches. In the stage area was a baldachin with curtains of purple silk worked with images of eagles, bears, unicorns and lions. This was Pelayo's court.

Their ears were assailed by a sudden hubbub of voices, the languages barely comprehensible. Groups of noblemen and armed men were exchanging information and pleasantries from one tier of benches to the next, while bare-chested servants handed round bowls of fruit and skins of wine. One of them ushered the Del Valles to seats in the third tier, while Duke Petro and his escort took their places at a small table to the right of the baldachin. Pelayo had not yet arrived. Feeling rather isolated in this assembly of tribal leaders, the Del Valles preferred to sit in silence.

After consulting some rolls of parchment set out on the table, Duke Petro stood up and gestured for silence, Liuva and Teudiselo flanking him on either side.

"May the sun of the Asturias bless you all, dear companions", he began. "Today all of us should be here, so it's only right that I introduce you to our new arrivals".

The assembled company, now fully attentive, turned their eyes on the pair from Valle. There was some suppressed laughter from the upper tiers when Hernando stood up and removed his bizarre head-covering with the crow's feathers.

"Have some respect for our new guests", ordered Petro. "This is Hernando Del Valle, Judge of the Autrigonian valleys, and the youngster beside him is my nephew".

Those present stood up as a mark of respect, with a clatter of heavy boots and a clangour of arms and armour.

"I am pleased to present, up there on the right, the heads of the Asturian tribes: Xilo of the Penii, leader of the Luggonian peoples, then Cilio of the Arnumini, Abilio of the Abilici, Milio of the Pembeli, Bartuelo of the Arcadeuni, and finally Naelio of the Paesician tribe", he said, as those mentioned raised their right hands. With the exception of Xilo, who wore a grey tunic, the others were dressed more or less in the style of Xosepe, the customs officer : light-blue skirted tunics under coats of scale armour, with ample brown cloaks tied at the neck and descending to their calves. Their hair and beards—in Xilo's case a distinguished ash grey denoting his seniority—were cut in the Roman style.

"And there, on the benches to the left, the Cantabrian chiefs: Talanio of the Blendii, Virone of the Conisci, Tridio of the Salaeni, Origeno of the Orgenomesci, Atia of the Tamarici, Doidero of the Vadinensi, Turenno of the Plentusi, Alia of the Avaragini, and Aluane of the Congani". Virone was dressed in yellow, Atia in black, Doidero in brown, all the others in orange garments. They wore no body armour, but all carried a dagger slipped crosswise under their belts and, unlike the Asturians, their hair and beards were long and unkempt. Hernando took a long look at Virone, who responded by raising his hand in a gesture of friendship. This was the first time they had actually met, though they were known to each other by reputation.

"And today we also have Eneko, Count of Calahorra, here with us! Welcome!", announced Duke Petro enthusiastically. However, the

Vasconian Count, a thin stick of a man with a hatchet face, muffled up in a green cape, remained seated, coolly unconcerned by the murmurs his discourtesy had occasioned. Petro did not insist, but went on to introduce the Visigoth men-at-arms seated on the lower benches: Anila, Aprila, Dunila, Dadila, Brandila, Rikkila, Wadila, Sunnila, Murila, Neufila, Beccila and Egila—Pelayo's twelve spatharii, his personal bodyguards. Each commanded a formation of one hundred horsemen.

"And up there, on the top tier on the right, the Swabian counts Ricimir, Filimir and Gildimir. Welcome to you!", continued the Duke, as three outstandingly handsome noblemen, clad in long mauve-coloured tunics, responded proudly to the general applause. They had just arrived from Galicia, recently laid waste by the Arab invaders, and had found refuge for themselves and two hundred of their soldiers at Cangas.

Duke Petro was about to return to his table, when an effeminate voice piped up sarcastically: "And what about me, cousin. Haven't you overlooked somebody?" The speaker was Sancho of San Emeterio, owner of half of Cantabria, gesturing in a sneering way from a bench in the second row. He was flanked by two of his guards, clad in black mail with the symbol of Neptune on their breastplates.

"No, I had not forgotten you, cousin . . . It's just that I wanted to re-read the list of your estates, the better to introduce you!", replied Petro with feline cunning.

The assembly broke out into laughter. Many remembered the Juliobriga affair and the humiliating verdict of old King Ergica. Count Sancho bit his tongue, merely reacting with a hypocritical half-smile.

"Good for you, Petro!", murmured Hernando, with a delighted snigger.

Again, Duke Petro called the meeting to order and introduced his notorious cousin, who only then rose to his feet, before returning to his table.

A few minutes went by, then suddenly the general buzz of conversation was interrupted again: Pelayo entered the room, followed by his son Fafila and two servants. The Visigoth leader was a very tall man, with a broad face and pale complexion. There was a hardness about his cobalt-blue eyes. Three scars disfigured his forehead and left cheekbone, barely covered by a fringe of grey hair and tawny-coloured beard. He wore a full-length white tunic, held in at the waist by a belt whose buckle bore the effigy

of an eagle in alabaster. His son, a lad of barely seventeen, was slim and of medium height, clad in a brown surcoat. Jet-black hair fell across his beardless face; it was difficult not to think of him as a young fawn.

Petro greeted them and escorted them to the baldachin, where the Visigoth nobleman took his seat on a wooden throne, facing the auditorium. His son sat on a low chair to his right. The twelve spatharii then shifted silently from their benches in the first tier and took up stations around the structure, planting their pikes on the pavement and thrusting out their chins with a martial gesture. Duke Pelayo raised his left arm and swept the assembly with a penetrating stare, letting his gaze rest for a while on Count Eneko, who responded with a frosty expression. Then Pelayo lowered his arm and Duke Petro unrolled the first of the parchments.

"We shall open this session with a message from Count Ricimir", he announced, before adding: "If you do not mind, we will use the language of Rome, since we all hold it in common".

At this, a well-favoured young man with page-boy hair style and tanned complexion rose to his feet on the right of the assembly, encouraged by his companions. His face, smooth except for the hint of a moustache, wore the grimace of a man resigned to a desperate fate.

"I am grateful for your applause, lords of Hispania, but must tell you that I have not come as a bearer of good tidings", he began, provoking a buzz of consternation. "In Galicia, we have been at war for at least twenty moons, and fate seems to be against us. The Arabs are led by Abd El Aziz, said to be the favourite son of Musa di Nusayr, governor of Africa. They can draw on thousands of troops, Berbers, Libyans, Syrians, Egyptians and Moors from Numidia. They wear light body armour and their horses are swift as arrows. They fight with long curved swords and their shields are small and easy to handle. They fall on us with the ferocity of wild animals, shouting the name of their god, and fight to the very last gasp."

The assembly heard him out in silence.

"And how many of them are there?", asked Turenno of the Plentusi, making the effort to speak in Latin.

"To give a truthful answer is difficult", replied the Swabian, "but I would say three or four thousand".

The Cantabrian chiefs exchanged comments among themselves.

Ricimir continued: "They have already taken Coimbra, Braga and Tuy . . . As I speak, they are laying siege to Lugo, whence I and these companions of mine fled two days ago . . . All hope was lost . . . The three

of us put our families aboard ship for Aquitaine. I hope one day to join my wife and sons at the court of King Dagobert in Austrasia".

The assembled company seemed shaken by this brief account.

Ricimir continued, relating what he had witnessed at Braga, which had fallen a few months earlier: the Arabs had taken no prisoners but had slit the throats of all the Christians they captured, then had sacked the defenceless city, deporting the women as slaves for their harems. A wave of fury swept across the amphitheatre, and Duke Petro had to stand to restore order.

"Now let us hear from the Asturian chieftains", he urged, hoping to give the shocked warriors some relief from the revelations of the Swabian knight.

At this, Xilo, chief of the Luggoni, unsheathed his sword and shouted his defiance heavenward: "They tell me that Xixon and Oviedo have suffered the same fate, but they will advance no further into the Asturias! I shall be waiting for them on the banks of the Rio Asta!", declared the grey-haired chief of the Luggoni, with his broken nose and scarred right cheek. The other Asturians cheered and exhorted him to continue on their behalf. The defiant gaze of the elderly warrior slowly swept the tiers of the amphitheatre, coming to rest on Pelayo.

"I am Xilo, son of Xinto, and like my companions I have five hundred men at my command. Up there, between the valleys of the Rio Nalón and the Rio Sella, we have been in training for a year, every day bearing burdens ten miles uphill on our backs . . . , hurling tree-trunks from one bank of our streams to the other, firing arrows from the tops of our mountains and fighting, naked with our javelins, against bears a great deal more famished than those filthy Mauritanians!"

Pelayo listened carefully, smiled for the first time and asked him a question in perfect Asturian: "Courageous Xilo, your heart roars like that of a true lion! But these are Arabs, not just Mauritanians—as you still call them—and they are well prepared to invade us . . . I learned it to my own cost in the retreat to Cordoba", he said, pointing to the three scars across his face. "You must get used to fighting with body armour, pikes and swords, as we Goths have always done!"

The Asturian looked at him, confused, then replied in Gothic:

"As you wish, warrior of the Rio Gades. We will follow your advice and allow your commanders to continue to train us . . . but let us keep our javelins! We wield them even better than we do our pricks!", he

shouted, rubbing his knee-cap. This provoked loud guffaws all round. The Cantabrian chieftains waved their daggers around in a show of solidarity, while the Visigoth spatharii could hardly keep a straight face.

Pelayo, too, laughed heartily. It was days since he had been in such a good mood. Then he glanced towards Petro. The old Duke nodded and Pelayo stood up, stepped down off the baldachin and began walking up and down in front of the audience.

"Listen to me!", he said, again choosing to speak in Latin. "I have seen these Arabs fight, and the Berbers too, when they opposed us on the Rio Gades. They have just one idea in mind . . . to subjugate us all, to themselves and to their god! And therefore they have faith, faith to move mountains, like ours . . . maybe more so than ours . . . and nothing will stop them, except a force of equal strength. Here we are assembled, I with my one thousand five hundred men, the Asturians with three thousand warriors, and all together—if the Cantabrians and Vasconians agree to help us—we can challenge them among these mountains . . . But arms are not sufficient without faith. This has to be your and our true strength. Here we are fighting to save Hispania and the Church! Do you understand what I am saying?", asked Pelayo, scrutinising their now anxious faces, and stopping again when he came to Eneko, who was listening with stony composure.

"I hope that my words are finding a way to your hearts, as well as reaching your minds. If we lose this war, Hispania will no longer exist, we shall no longer be free, our God will be banished from these lands, together with the older gods to whom many of you still pray. And the Saracens will certainly not stop there. They will go on to fight the Franks, then the Alamanni and the Lombards, before marching on to Rome, and finally Constantinople. Their god will take the place of Jesus Christ all over the world and there will no longer be churches to glorify him!"

Toribio, petrified by the very thought, felt the ruby cross stir against his breast.

"So I want you to know. Here we are fighting a war to prevent the end of the world as we know it. We Visigoths are ready to lay down our lives to the last man and woman to defend what our fathers have held dear since the days of King Reccared. For more than eighty years now we have wandered the lands of this continent and we have nowhere to bring up our children except for this land of Hispania. Our destiny is your destiny. So let us join forces and defend forever the freedom of our peoples!"

Duke Petro was moved. He shot a glance at his brother-in-law, who seemed on fire with the power of his words.

"Hispania, Hispania, Hispania!", roared the Asturian chieftains, now on their feet, and the Cantabrians, led by Hernando and Toribio, immediately took up the cry. Only Count Eneko remained silent. Pelayo looked towards Petro and returned to his seat. The Duke of Amaya then rose from his table, no parchment in hand this time. "Now let us hear from Count Eneko of Calahorra, on behalf of the Vasconians", he cried.

The man with the hatchet face nodded and rose.

"Lords of Hispania, I am here as ambassador for my father, our Patriarch Momo of Pamplona . . . and I thank you for your kind attention", he began, maintaining a certain detachment. "I have listened to the speeches of the valorous knights from ancient Swabia, the ardent warriors from the Asturias, and your commander Pelayo", he said, putting the emphasis on the word "your".

"But you must know that we Vasconians, though we have thousands of soldiers ready to unsheathe the sword to defend our borders, as some of you here present are well aware, . . . we do not view this danger with the same fear as I detect in your eyes and hearts", he continued, as a wave of indignation slowly swept the audience.

"No indeed, my illustrious lords of Hispania! I have to tell you that your destiny is different from ours, and so it has always been, from time immemorial, when our ancestors defended themselves alone, first against the Romans, then against the Goths, whose descendents are so prominent in this assembly today!", he announced, looking towards Pelayo and Petro with a challenge in his gaze.

The onlookers were red with embarrassment.

"We shall defend ourselves alone, as we have always done", concluded Eneko.

Petro and Pelayo exchanged glances.

"Count Eneko, have I really understood what you are saying? That we shall receive no help from you at all?", asked Duke Petro.

"Precisely", replied the other. "Unless . . .", and here he stopped.

"Unless what?", asked the Duke.

"Unless you guarantee the independence of our lands in perpetuity and never again try to attack our people, as you have done for centuries", went on the Vasconian.

The assembly was riven with murmurs of dismay and unease, some being less inclined to tax Eneko with arrogance than others. Pelayo lowered his eyes and thought hard. Then he looked up again and replied:

"I, Pelayo of Toledo, cannot swear fidelity to agreements as you might expect from a king of the Visigoths. As things stand, we no longer have a king. Roderic was drowned in the waters of the Rio Gades, and Petro and I are the last of the Visigoth dukes. How, then, can we swear as to what will happen between our people and yours?"

Eneko squared up to him and replied: "Why then should we lay ourselves at the feet of men who do not even rule their people? We have a patriarch; our people have never had a king. We have always kept our own council and always the peoples of Hispania have been against us . . . Why then should we now behave like lambs and follow your behests?", asked the little Count with a flush of pride.

"We can pledge on our honour that there will be no more wars between the peoples of Hispania", broke in Petro.

"No, Duke of Amaya, we are not interested in the destinies of other peoples, but only of the tribes of Vasconia. That is how we are made, and have been since the world began", replied Eneko.

"Vasconians you are and Vasconians you always will be!", shouted Hernando, by now roused to fury. "For centuries, you have picked quarrels with everyone . . . with the Romans, with the Varduli, with the Berones, with the Autrigonians, and even with the Franks! And what would you lose by accepting the peace offered by the last Visigoth dukes?", he demanded, purple in the face.

Count Eneko gave him a serious look.

"Well then? What have you got to say? I am both Autrigonian and Vasconian by birth! Am I your enemy?", the Judge from Valle asked provocatively.

The count seemed paralysed by the sheer force of his intervention.

"I will think about what you have said", he replied. "This evening, I shall be leaving with my escort and I will let you know. I shall have to discuss it with my father."

"And greet him warmly from me, for he is my grandfather's brother. Tell him I am the son of his niece Amagoya, your first cousin!", snarled the cantankerous Judge, pressing his advantage.

Eneko descended the steps of the auditorium, bade farewell to his relative, sketched a gesture of homage to the Visigoth dukes and left

the room. The assembly was shocked into silence by the dramatic scene they had witnessed. Petro exchanged a few words with Pelayo. The latter gestured his thanks towards Hernando, then continued: "It is a bitter thing, my lords, to have to admit that the Vasconians will not help us, but we must press ahead regardless."

He then returned to the baldachin, where he stroked the head of his son Fafila and finally sat down on the throne, drained by the hard words addressed to him.

The buzz of conversation had resumed, when Petro again got up to speak.

"Well, we can definitely count on more than four thousand warriors. But what do the Cantabrian tribes intend to do?", he asked, turning to the benches on his left.

Virone, leader of the Conisci, stood up and replied in his crude Latin:

"We are saddened by what we have just heard. We Conisci, like many other Cantabrian tribes, have defended our families over the centuries, but we have never disdained the Pax Romana, which brought us bridges, roads and irrigation systems, and did not presume to destroy our religion", he said, to vigorous applause. Then the Cantabrian chiefs put their heads together and finally Tridio, leader of the Salaeni, garbed in bright orange, spoke for them all: "We will tell our people to join forces with you. We will muster one hundred warriors from each tribe, making nine hundred in all, and we will be victorious for the glory of all the peoples of Hispania and the salvation of our womenfolk, who are without equal in beauty!", he concluded, brandishing his sword.

There was a general outburst of exultation. Hernando was happy. Now they all felt more relaxed, even though the discourtesy of the Vasconian count still weighed heavily on the assembly.

"So be it, then", said Petro. "And now let us hear from Count Sancho of San Emeterio, who, I hope, will assist us in procuring supplies."

His cousin smiled and finally rose to his feet. "How could I pass up my chance to make history?", he joked. "For sure, you will have the best beverages from the Tarragon area and from Aquitaine, salted meat, poultry, bacon, pulmento, garum, chickpeas, beans, olive and linseed oil, and ten thousand pots of honey, even if I have to bring them all the way from Cartagena", he continued, at last winning a degree of sympathy and approval.

"He will pass them off as newly acquired merchandise, but they are bound to be old stock from his warehouses", Hernando muttered quietly to Toribio.

"That's good, Sancho. Your generosity is very heartening", approved Petro. "Today we feel that your wealth is wedded to our cause", and he led the assembly in applause directed towards his cousin. Everyone joined in, except of course the Judge from Valle de Autrigonia.

Just then a messenger entered the hall and hurried towards Pelayo's baldachin. The spatharii barred his way and he was taken aside by Liuva and Teudiselo. They listened to what he had to say, then reported to Duke Petro, whose features registered disappointment. The elderly Duke approached Pelayo and they exchanged a few words.

Then Petro announced: "My lords, we shall convene again tomorrow at dawn. Bishop Astasio, or so I am informed, has been delayed by a storm that overtook him on the banks of Lake Regina. His messenger tells us he will not be here until late evening."

Pelayo then took his leave and withdrew with his son and two retainers, his bodyguard escorting them.

Gradually all the other warriors vacated the benches of the amphitheatre, but not before Hernando had shaken hands with Virone. The pair were soon firm friends and Virone invited him to lunch in his own lodgings.

And so the assembly broke up, with the certainty that the events they had witnessed would never be forgotten in the history of the peoples of this world.

CHAPTER VIII

AGASINDA

Not far from the old Legates' Palace, they found Valerio waiting for them, anxious to know the outcome of the meeting.

"How did it go, then?", asked the monk.

"I'll tell you later", replied Toribio, certain that his father would not want to stop and explain such matters to his friend.

"You can tell him now", said his father brusquely. "Valerio, keep Toribio company, we'll meet up again for supper this evening".

"You mean you don't want me to come with you and meet the valiant Virone?", asked his son.

"Of course, I'd like you to come!", replied the other. "But it's better you spend a bit of time at the villa of Duchess Gaudiosa. I've noted that she has some handsome daughters and you should make friends, a young chap like you! And at Virone's we shall be having a pagan celebration. You and Valerio would do better to mix with those of your own persuasion!"

Toribio and Valerio were by now inured to the old man's acid comments. In any case, they both understood that he needed a bit of time to relax. They nodded their agreement and Hernando quickened his pace to catch up with Virone, who was in conference with the other Cantabrian chieftains.

As they descended the hill, all around them Toribio and Valerio noticed groups of Visigoth warriors training hundreds of Asturians in swordsmanship. Toribio caught sight of Fafila, surrounded by a squad of archers, having a lively argument with a girl of around fourteen. The latter was holding a longbow, which almost touched the ground at her feet, and seemed offended by his criticisms.

"No, not like that!", Pelayo's son was explaining. "You should draw the bow more smoothly, as if it were an extension of your arm. Imagine it is part of your body".

The girl seemed not to appreciate the lecture.

"You've already told me three times, sweetie pie. Isn't that just what I am doing?", she shot back.

Fafila raised his eyes heavenwards, then looked her up and down. She was a delightful girl with red hair and green eyes, wearing a short white gown, a leather jacket and a belt with the buckle in the shape of a honey-bee. At her neck, Toribio noted a cord from which hung a shard of silver.

"You see that girl there?", said Valerio, indicating her with a nod of the head.

"I do indeed, Valerio! She is very beautiful, but not particularly suited to firing darts!"

Valerio laughed. "That is Froliuba, Fafila's betrothed, or so I learned from her tutor Liuberic. I've been here all morning watching her train. Actually, Fafila is wrong. He's too quick to criticise, having only just arrived. Earlier I saw her score direct hits on a pair of baskets from a distance of one hundred metres. That one is a born archer!", stated the monk with conviction.

As he walked past, Toribio noted that, despite their sharp comments, the two youngsters were exchanging amorous glances. He felt a pang of envy, but thought that perhaps he, too, one day would have the pleasure of teaching his fiancée to draw a bow, or even defend herself with a sword.

Valerio seemed to read his thoughts.

"Don't fret yourself, my friend. Let time do its work and you will have the most beautiful girl in all Hispania", said the monk.

Toribio seemed reluctant to believe it, but underneath it all, yes, he exulted in the thought. But when would that day come?

As they were passing the archers, Fafila turned and made as if to stop them.

"I have heard great things about you, Toribio Del Valle and Valerio of Amaya! Duke Petro tells me you are bursting with Christian faith as these soldiers are exuding sweat", said the young man with the fawn-like face.

"I am glad to hear you say so, *domne* Fafila. But I owe it all to this old friend of mine", replied Toribio, disquieted by the contrast with the attitude of his pagan father.

"Wait a minute", broke in Fafila. "Don't call me *domne*. I am just a boy and my father would not like to hear me addressed in that way. As far as he is concerned, it would seem that I can never grow up.

"As you wish, then, Fafila", replied Toribio. "But I see you teach bowmanship like an expert. I'm sorry to hear you father still treats you as a child."

"It's difficult having a father like mine", said the young man. "What is your father like?"

"Sometimes he treats me like a man, sometimes like a child", replied Toribio.

Fafila laughed and replied: "That's our elders for you. Never quite satisfied that we have proved our worth!"

Then he introduced them to Froliuba. The girl first looked at the monk with a haughty air, then at Toribio, with a more friendly expression.

"This is Toribio Del Valle, mulehead! Ask him to show you how to draw a bow" said Fafila arrogantly. Needing no second bidding, Froliuba passed the bow to the lad from Autrigonia.

"There, that straw target", she said, pointing. Toribio made out a red dummy about two hundred yards away.

Fafila's tutor, Liuberic, called a halt to training and all the soldiers in the vicinity, Goths and Asturians, gathered to watch. Toribio felt a wave of anxiety sweep over him and was hesitant to take up the challenge. This was an opportunity, he realised, to show his worth and impress a great man's son, but what if he made a hash of it?

Valerio gave him a word of encouragement in the Cantabrian dialect: "Go on! It's a way of establishing friendship among these people."

Toribio drew the bowstring and the next few moments seemed like years. He remembered the exercises he had done with his father, from the age of ten, but still he lacked assurance. He took aim on the dummy and felt the cross stir against his breast, as if caressing him. Relief swept over him . . . This was a moment of grace. He released the bowstring and the arrow was gone. It described a perfect parabola, and struck the dummy full in the chest.

The bystanders were astonished.

"Who is that young man?", shouted one of them.

"Toribio Del Valle, by Jupiter! Isn't that good enough for you?", said Valerio.

Everybody congratulated him, wanting to know who his father was and, of course, where on earth was Valle. Fafila was radiant, and Froliuba observed the young man with extreme admiration.

"You are an archer. You should have told me so immediately", said Pelayo's young son.

"Just my lucky day", said Toribio, playing down his achievement.

"Lucky that you are here with us!", said Froliuba with enthusiasm.

"Toribio Del Valle!", exclaimed Fafila, "From today, you are my lifelong friend, and I want you to be a witness at my wedding!"

Toribio was embarrassed.

"That is too great an honour, Fafila, for firing an arrow into a dummy."

"Not honour enough!", exclaimed old Liuberic. "No one has yet scored a direct hit on that straw bastard. Well done!"

Valerio felt a sense of pride at what he had witnessed, and could not resist making a little sermon.

"You see, soldiers?", he said. "That arrow is a symbol of faith! In safe hands it never misses its mark."

"Hey, monk Valerio, this handsome young chap no doubt has plenty of faith, but without his muscles and skill, where would the arrow have gone?", Froliuba interrupted, a little rudely.

Valerio looked at the Visigoth maiden, her face covered with freckles that matched her hair.

"What's this, my little spinning-top? Are you contradicting me?", asked the cleric in fatherly fashion.

Froliuba stared back, vexed.

"You call me a spinning-top. Have you no idea to whom you are speaking, monk from Rome?"

Fafila turned his eyes heavenwards once again and placed one hand over the girl's mouth: "Calm down, he was only joking."

All the men present laughed and Valerio stroked her forehead. Froliuba gave a haughty grimace and returned to her shooting practice, spitting on the ground and muttering insults in her own language. The older men laughed again. She was well known for her difficult character: "Proud as her father Teodomir", commented her tutor Liuberic, whose face was lined and furrowed.

"And don't mention the Roman Pontiff in her presence", added another man-at-arms, with a glance at Valerio, "or she'll eat you alive!"

Valerio had understood: this young demon was none other than the daughter of the hero of the battle of Rio Gades, and she had been brought up as an Arian, like her father.

Fafila watched her from the corner of his eye, then approached Toribio.

"Well done, thank you for such a good lesson", he said with a smile, as a gust of wind ruffled his raven hair. "I was quite serious, Toribio. I would be honoured if you would be present at my wedding".

"Where are you getting married?", asked Valerio.

"At San Martín de Turieno. At the next waning of the moon", replied Fafila happily.

"The second Sunday in May, then", said the monk, calculating rapidly.

"Quite right. My father says the season of the first strawberries is the most auspicious . . . Everyone will be there; he has even invited Duke Petro and the Asturian chiefs", explained the young man.

"Who will be taking the service", asked Valerio, a slight doubt in his voice.

"We have not yet chosen the pastor, possibly the archdeacon of San Estephan, or the one from San Michel", replied Fafila.

"Why not the Bishop of Amaya, Fruttuoso? He is a friend of mine", said the monk.

The young man looked him in the eye, hesitating. Valerio understood.

"I'm sorry, Valerio. But the ceremony will be held at dawn, and according to our own rite. My father has willed it should be so out of respect for Froliuba's father".

The monk shook his head. After so many centuries of controversy, the old heresy was still tenacious of life.

"I'm sorry, Fafila, I would really have liked you to be Roman Christians, you and that little red star of yours!", he said severely.

"Never mind, Valerio, bless their marriage. They're still Christians, aren't they?", urged Toribio.

Valerio looked at his friend, then at the young nobleman.

"Alright, then. But on condition that I marry you!", he said.

Toribio was left speechless. A Byzantine monk, educated in Rome like Valerio, agreeing to officiate at an Arian ceremony was not an everyday occurrence. But that was another proof of their friendship.

"Fafila", said Toribio, "I swear to you that if Valerio officiates, I shall be your witness and I shall pray that all these hostilities between fellow

Christians come to an end once and for all, even if it takes another thousand years."

Having said this, he felt the warmth of the cross on the muscles of his neck. Fafila was overcome with emotion. The wind was now blowing strongly, ruffling their hair and making their voices indistinguishable.

"Amen. May that day come quickly. Glory to God in the highest", cried the young man.

"And peace on earth to all men of good will", replied Valerio, suddenly putting his arms round both their shoulders.

The wind died down. So the pair left Fafila to his work of training the Asturians and turned towards Gaudiosa's villa for the noonday meal.

The Duchess, with Ermesinda clinging to her skirt, was surprised to see them. Aged six, the little madam was dressed in a white sleeveless gown in the Gallic style. From her face, framed by long blond tresses, stared the cobalt-blue eyes of her father, wearing the same expression of authority.

"So soon? And where is your father?", asked Gaudiosa.

"The meeting was adjourned because Bishop Astasio has been delayed . . . We shall resume tomorrow", replied the young man, and told her what he had heard. The Duchess seemed a little sceptical.

"Delayed? That's strange . . . one of my own servants arrived by that same road this morning and made no mention of a storm. The sun was shining from Palencia to Ponte Reina!"

"Maybe they took a different route?", suggested Valerio.

"What does it matter?", said the noblewoman from Toledo. "Come, I will tell the servants to wring the necks of those fine geese that honk under my windows every morning."

So saying, she called an old retainer of brawny, hirsute appearance.

"Adriano!", she ordered, "Take care of those noisy beasts in the northern courtyard, then lay the table in the small hall. It will be just as comfortable."

"Mummy, I want to go with Adriano. I'll deal with those geese!", piped up the child at her side.

Her mother laughed. "All right, Ermesinda, but make sure you don't get blood all over your gown!"

And then, a little uncertainly, she added: "Toribio, would you like to go, too? Agasinda is still with her tutor, having a harp lesson . . . you'll get bored waiting for the meal to cook."

"Yes, mummy, I want Toribio to come with me!", said the little one.

"Is there any way I can refuse?", asked the young man, amused.

"No, you can't say no to the *dominula*, unless you want your own neck wrung!", added Valerio.

Thus Valerio stayed and kept company with Gaudiosa, while the young warrior was obliged to satisfy the imperious curiosity of her young daughter.

"What animals are there in your part of the world?", asked Ermesinda as they passed through the portico leading to the last courtyard.

"Well, let me see now . . .", began Toribio, raising his eyebrows. "We have lions . . . unicorns, tigers . . . vultures, kites and . . . of course, dragons!", he concluded flaring his nostrils in imitation of a monster.

"Ha, ha, ha! Very funny!", laughed the child. "Lies, all lies. I don't believe you have all those beasts. Lions live only in Africa, tigers in India, kites in Italy, and dragons . . . in the land of perpetual ice."

Toribio laughed heartily, his bluff called. Adriano, meanwhile, waved his hands in a gesture indicating that the girl was not one to be taken in by anybody.

"Ermesinda, where did you learn all these things", asked Toribio.

"My sister Agasinda told me . . . she knows all there is to know about plants and animals . . . she has read the books in our tutor's library . . . the ones with coloured plates", replied the little imp.

Then she asked, mischievously: "And do you have a king?"

"No we only have a judge, my father. But does it matter?", replied Toribio, his interest roused by the tone of her question.

"A judge? Who does a judge have under his command? Is he more powerful than a count? Or a duke?", she continued impertinently.

"A judge serves a duke or a count, depending on who owns his lands, but he is responsible for his people like a father for his family", explained Toribio.

The girl seemed confused by this unfamiliar set of ideas. Then, throwing out her chest, continued: "I know my father will be king of the Visigoths. My sister always tells me so. Do you know who our kings were before?"

Toribio professed ignorance.

"King Roderic, who was a friend of my father, then before that there was Wittiza . . . and before him Ergica, Erwig, Wamba . . . and Recceswinth and Chindaswinth, who gave us our laws . . . or so my father always

tells me", she continued, "then before that Tulga, Chintila, Sisenand and Suintila, who drove out the Byzantines . . . and Reccared the Second, then Sisebut, the writer king, who taught the Jews a lesson . . . before him Gundemar, and finally . . .", here the child lost the thread, "Liuva . . . no wait . . . Witteric the Arian . . . or was it Reccared the First? . . . no, that's as far back as I can go!"

Toribio laughed and looked at the old retainer, who was also delighted by the young aristocrat's erudition.

"You're really well educated, Ermesinda. And do you also know the dates of the Councils of Toledo?", he asked cunningly. Adriano smiled.

"Councils?" What are they?", asked the girl.

The two men laughed. Meanwhile they reached the last courtyard. Here Adriano grabbed hold of a pair of geese, returned with them to the covered portico and wrung their necks. Ermesinda watched him seriously, displaying a somewhat unhealthy interest.

"Let me do it, too", she said. "Adriano, go and get one for me!"

Adriano caught another goose and brought it back to her. Ermesinda grasped it below the beak, but the bird struggled and turned on her. Ermesinda ran off down the corridor, pursued by the goose, weeping and crying out in fear. Toribio ran after the goose and caught it, holding it by the wings.

"Kill it! Kill it!", yelled the girl furiously. "Look, it hurt me", she said, showing where it had left a mark on her hand.

Toribio closed his right hand on the bird's neck, but was suddenly overcome by a kind of paralysis. The goose seemed lifeless, as if already dead, but the young man was incapable of tightening his grip any further. Instead, he felt a shudder run through his chest, where the cross now seemed to weigh more heavily.

"Two are all we need. And anyway, Ermesinda, it's your fault. You wanted to kill it and it defended itself. Don't you realise that animals, too, have a right to defend themselves?", he said, troubled by the sorry figure he was cutting.

He then released the goose, which flapped off to join its companions, all of which were honking in anger.

Adriano looked at him in some perplexity, but made no comment.

"You are right, sir knight", he said. "Two are quite sufficient for lunch."

The three of them then returned the way they had come.

It was only then that Toribio realised the incident had been observed by another party. In the distance, at the corner of the portico leading into the central hall of the palace, stood a beautiful maiden wearing a long amaranthine silk dress, her breast adorned with peach blossom and her forehead graced by a daisy chain.

"Agasinda, Agasinda!", cried the young girl. "What sort of warrior is this? Did you see? He can't even kill a goose."

"He didn't kill it because there was no need to", replied her sister with compunction.

"Agasinda, you must be Pelayo's other daughter?", enquired Toribio, choking with emotion.

"Yes, sir knight, and I am the sister of this insolent little hussy. Has she caused you much embarrassment?"

Ermesinda looked as if she was going to sulk.

"Oh no . . . not at all. She has taught me the succession of all your kings! I could not have been better instructed at Amaya!", replied the young man, at which Ermesinda stuck her tongue out at her sister.

"That's enough of your cheek! Adriano, take her to my mother, otherwise she'll think she's so important she can importune every knight who passes through the Asturias", added the girl with the crown of daisies.

Adriano did as he was told, lifting Ermesinda on his left arm and bearing her off, while in his right hand he grasped the feet of the slaughtered geese.

The two young people began strolling through the portico. Agasinda had a clear, well-defined face. Her chin and jaw, drawn with masculine tautness, formed a bow-shape enclosing a straight mouth with firm, prominent lips, like those of Toribio. Her modestly proportioned nose barely rose from the flesh of her cheeks, above which her wide, almond-shaped eyes seem to have been drawn with all the art of a master mosaicist. They were a deep amber colour and sparkled in the afternoon light like those of a lynx in the Salmatian forests. Her chestnut hair, gathered under the chain of daisies, was long and straight, amply covering her shoulders. She was not buxom, but her long bare legs seemed to flow out from under her tunic, culminating in leather-clad ankles as slim and sensual as those of a Greek goddess.

As they walked, the shadows of the columns alternated with bright shafts of sunlight, lending sinuous movement to her Celtic profile. Toribio was so absorbed in watching her as to be barely aware of what she was saying, and as he answered her questions about his ancestry, he felt a wave of physical desire pervade his body.

"Autrigonians?", interrupted the girl. "Then you are not really Cantabrians?"

Toribio had to turn away in order to concentrate.

"No, no one really knows where we came from, but I'm only telling you half the story where my father is concerned. In fact, he is half Vasconian . . ."

The girl grimaced a little sadly.

"My father does not like the Vasconians, you know?"

"So I have heard, but few people do like them, and maybe it is their own fault . . . They always want to do things their own way."

"Do you think that is wrong of them?", asked the girl.

"I really cannot say, but in this world it seems to me that no one dare remain aloof from his brothers forever", replied Toribio, noting that Agasinda shared his serious turn of mind.

"You are a man of wise words!", said the girl.

"My mother always taught me to love my enemies as if they were my friends", replied Toribio, thinking to impress her.

"But your mother, I have heard, was a Visigoth like us . . . and we have enemies on every side", replied Agasinda, suddenly assuming an air of severity.

"So you see? Vasconians or Goths, in the end no one is free of hatred!", said Toribio, drawing a logical conclusion.

"I like your intelligence . . . My father used to talk like that when I was younger . . . he had recently been baptised . . . then that cursed battle on the Rio Gades changed him . . . forever", she said, a distant, dark look in her eyes.

"Don't let it depress you, Agasinda", broke in Toribio. "Better days are coming, and these wars will finally be over."

"How can you see so far ahead?", asked the girl, stopping in her tracks.

Toribio stood still. Agasinda's eyes were now on his lips. He was deeply stirred. He could have told her about the cross and Valerio's dream, and . . . was almost on the point of doing so, when suddenly a voice

prevented him. It was Valerio who had come looking for them. Duchess Gaudiosa was bidding them come and eat.

So the two young people sat down at a light ashwood table, hastily set up in a *triclinium* smaller than that of the evening before, which may once have been the private dining-room of the Roman family who occupied the villa. The servants brought in a spicy soup made of fat pork, herbs and onions.

"You see, Toribio", explained the duchess. "Since the Saracens invaded the Roman Sea, we have no longer been able to get pepper, but this soup contains some that was sent me by a cousin in Sicily."

Toribio swallowed down the broth, which was really good, but without once taking his eyes off Agasinda.

"I am glad to see you making friends", said Gaudiosa. "My daughters lack male companions worthy of them in this wild land! It is our good fortune to have you here, son of Goswinta, with your good manners."

Agasinda seemed very pleased to have her mother's approval. This is it, then, thought Toribio, this must be the beginning of an engagement. Valerio smiled from ear to ear, but made no comment.

The servants finally brought in the geese. They were excellent, stuffed with myrtle berries and acorns, and sprinkled with crushed cloves and cinnamon. For dessert, they served some blackcurrant tarts. Toribio had never eaten so well in all his life. Not even Grandma Amagoya's pancakes could compare. It was the eighth hour by the time they finished, but the sun was still high in the sky.

After lunch, Valerio retired to read the holy scriptures. The duchess sent Ermesinda off to her nurse, then withdrew to her own room. The two young people were again left alone.

"Have you ever heard the sound of a harp?", asked Agasinda. Toribio's interest was clearly awakened. She courteously took him by the hand and led him through a long corridor, to a room painted a light topaz blue. Here, in the centre, stood a large instrument, consisting of many strings stretched between two curved wooden arms with gilded pommels. The girl sat down on a stool and began to pluck the strings. The instrument produced a melodious sound which played on Toribio's sensibilities as if he were being caressed with magic fingertips. Agasinda ran her hands and fingers along the tightly stretched strings as if weaving a tapestry. The young man listened, enchanted, never once interrupting her.

"I am sorry I have to leave soon", said the girl unexpectedly, abandoning the strings of the instrument and dropping her gaze. Toribio was brought up short, as if he had received a blow to the stomach.

"And wh . . . where are you going?", he said, stammering in disappointment.

"To the convent of Santa Maria de Monsacri , where my aunt Verosinda is abbess, to prepare for my brother's wedding", replied the Visigoth maiden, slightly amused by the alarm she had sown in the handsome young man.

Toribio gave a sigh of relief. So it was only for a few weeks, he thought.

"Well, I'll be there, too", said the young man from Valle.

"Really?", asked Agasinda in amazement.

"Yes, certainly. Your brother has asked me to act as witness . . . He asked me this very morning, soon after we first met".

Agasinda's eyes shone. All these coincidences must add up to something.

"That makes me really happy", she said, giving Toribio the sweetest of looks. "And may heaven bless this joy", he replied in a whisper, breaking into a broad smile.

"Come, I want to teach you a new game", Agasinda said. The two of them got up and she signalled to him to follow. They left the light blue room, ran along an external passageway, jumped down three steps and finally came to a pergola covered with grape vines, the fruit not yet ripe but the foliage luxuriant. There in the shade stood a marble table and two little stone chairs.

"Come and sit down and I'll show you how to play", said Agasinda.

So the two youngsters spent the rest of the afternoon at that strange table, whose surface consisted of black and white squares with figures of kings, knights, castles, bishops and pawns. Agasinda explained that it was a game of Arab origin, called chess—a novelty. Toribio soon picked up the rules and they continued to play for hours, occasionally locking eyes across the table, until the light began to fade.

In the late evening, Hernando arrived, together with Pelayo, Fafila, Petro and all the Asturian and Cantabrian leaders. The men wore body armour and were armed with swords. They had been training for the rest of the day and were hungry as hunters. Gaudiosa had prepared a magnificent

banquet in the hall where the Del Valles had dined the previous evening. Now the great table groaned with sides of venison and pork, goat's meat, chickens and an abundance of fish . . . tench, eels, conger and turbot in garum sauce . . . These dishes were accompanied by rice cooked in milk, peas, onions, green salad and chickpeas, and followed by cheese, myrtle-berry, raspberry and strawberry tarts. The steward ordered the servants to serve mint-flavoured wine.

At around the tenth hour, Asturian dancers arrived and the men, already aroused by the strong drink, yelled like wild animals on heat. The evening continued with individual and choral singing in different languages. As usual, the dancing girls' thighs came in for a lot of slaps and pressing and many of the men collapsed dead drunk along the peristyle.

Toribio, Fafila and Agasinda had retired to their rooms long before, as had Valerio. The young Del Valle was too tired to keep company with his father, and too happy besides. His mind continued to flash up images of the young maiden's face. He imagined having her at his side for the rest of his life. But no, maybe he should not be looking so far ahead. But it was strange. That very morning, Valerio has prophesied he would marry the most beautiful woman in Hispania. Could it be her?

While absorbed in these thoughts, Toribio heard the heavy wheels of a carriage pass under his window. The clamour of the guests had died down and now he could hear the voices of people along the street.

"The Bishop. The Bishop. The Bishop has arrived!", they cried.

Then it was that he felt the cross vibrate. He felt uneasy. It was as if it wanted to tell him something, but he could not make out what. He touched the ruby, then fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER IX

THE BISHOP OF TOLEDO

The assembly convened again at first light. All the leaders from the previous day were there, except for Count Eneko, who after his sensational refusal to cooperate had broken camp and was already well on his way to Calahorra with his retinue. Duke Petro was recording the attendance, standing by his official table, at which his scribes minuted the proceedings on wax tablets before writing a summary in parchment notebooks each evening. Pelayo had already arrived with his son and twelve spatharii. Hernando and Toribio, too, had taken their seats, this time alongside the Cantabrian chieftains.

At this point, a Visigoth herald stationed himself at the entrance to the amphitheatre, blew a note on a long convoluted horn and announced the arrival of the Metropolitan of Toledo. Toribio was aquiver with excitement and would have liked Valerio to be there with him. After a few moments' silence, a fat bald man appeared, wearing a surplice of fine white linen with gold-embroidered edges and, over it, a green amice, sparkling with pearls and precious stones. In his right hand he grasped a red crosier, while on his head he wore a purple cap with long ribbons weighted down with large cameos of red cornelian.

"Welcome among us, Astasio, Bishop of Toledo", said Duke Petro by way of greeting, as everybody, including Pelayo and his men, rose to their feet.

"May God be with you, brothers!", began the Bishop in a soft sensual voice that was not to Toribio's liking.

The cross suddenly seemed icy cold against his breast. The Bishop advanced to the centre of the hall, eyed them all, then paid his respects to Pelayo, who invited him to sit on his left. The spatharii stood stock still and allowed him to pass between them, though Toribio observed a shadow of unease pass over their faces.

The cleric sat down and Pelayo rose to speak.

"We are honoured by the visit of the new Bishop of Toledo, who has undertaken this difficult journey to bless our resistance to the invader and

advise us how best to conduct ourselves in these sad times. It is for our faith and survival that we are fighting, and I hope that those of you who still believe in the old gods will also understand what it means to defend the principles that have nourished the hearts and minds of their fathers. So, Christian friends of mine, and you who believe in the gods of woods, rivers and mountains, be aware that we are gathered here in a common cause: to defend the faith of our fathers, the land they have bequeathed to us, the blood that runs in our veins. So for the glory of Hispania we welcome the Metropolitan of Toledo!"

Pelayo's words stirred the hearts of those simple-hearted men, and all began to shout: "Hispania, Hispania, Hispania!", each brandishing his weapon.

"We invite Bishop Astasio to speak", thundered Duke Petro.

The man in the white surplice and purple cap rose slowly and stepped down from the dais of the baldachin to face the audience. Toribio became acutely aware of his plump features, piggy face, dull eyes, stubbly beard and oily complexion.

"I have come to give you my blessing, brothers! Know that your enterprise is close to my heart and that in Toledo there is much talk of your courage. But have a care . . .", he warned, his eyes suddenly flashing, "the Saracens are everywhere, the walls have ears, and they know who you are and what you are doing!

As well as the thousands still in Galicia, more than four thousand Arabs are now at Oviedo, under the command of Emir Musa, and at least three thousand Berbers will soon be arriving from Toledo and the Cartagena region, led by General Tariq, to join forces with them before the gates of that city."

"You should also know that Musa's son, Abd el Aziz, is embarking two thousand men in Galicia for Campus Turris, which you call Xixon, where—as you well know—the Berber vanguard has already secured a bridgehead these last two moons. So I am telling you that you will be attacked from the West . . . and by an army of at least ten thousand! . . . Troops well trained and battle hardened . . . many of them fought on the Rio Gades. They have impenetrable armour, black as night, and helmets hard as stone . . . their scimitars cut through flesh as if it were butter . . . and they take no prisoners", explained the Bishop with a grimace.

The audience hung on his words.

"In Toledo, I have come to know General Tariq, son of Ziyad, who is a Berber but, like all the Saracens, believes only in Allah, their one God. He is a very intelligent man and fights like a tiger. I have seen him training with his peers . . . he can cut the head and arms from a dummy with a single blow!"

A subdued grumbling broke out and rose towards the arched ceiling.

"How do you know so much about our enemies?", interrupted the Asturian chief Milo, rising from his bench and eyeing the Bishop defiantly. The assembled company followed developments with consternation. The Bishop looked him straight in the eye, but Milo was not to be put off.

"The Saracens treat me well because they know that my flock bears neither offensive nor defensive weapons, brother", replied the cleric.

"But you are of a different faith. Is it not true that they persecute Christians, as we have so often heard?", retorted Abilio of the Abilici, watching him suspiciously.

"All lies!", replied Astasio promptly. "They have told you a pack of lies. The Saracens have never persecuted Christians, with the result that in Toledo many brothers have accepted the new order. If you want to win this war, you must go about it by peaceful means. Meet with them and parley like men", replied the Bishop, pointing his staff in the direction of the Asturians.

Pelayo and Petro exchanged glances, taken aback by his words. Hernando looked at Toribio reproachfully. The young man appeared confused.

"Listen carefully, my Visigoth, Asturian and Cantabrian brothers! I can bless your intention to defend your lands, provided that you first follow the way of wisdom. The new governor of Xixon, the Berber Munuza, has no wife and I am well aware that your Pelayo has a beautiful sister living at the convent of Santa Maria de Monsacri. Would it not be better to try and secure peace through a marriage alliance?", suggested the Bishop.

Pelayo almost fell from his throne. "Verosinda? My most dear and devout sister? But, by all the saints of Holy Mother Church, she is already wedded to Jesus Christ!", objected the Duke in great agitation.

"Wedded to Christ?", echoed the bishop. "Jesus has enough such wives, beautiful and fertile women who do nothing but pray from morning to night, instead of bearing children. What harm can it do if just one of them devotes herself to the salvation of Hispania?"

Incredulous, the on-lookers were thrown into total disarray.

"Tonight I shall be leaving for Xixon. I intend to meet this man tomorrow. We still have time to secure an honourable peace. What do you want to do?", urged the man with the red staff.

"Mix my blood with that of a follower of Mohamed? What a monstrous sacrifice! How can I ask my sister to defile herself in such a way?", retorted Duke Pelayo, visibly shaken.

"Your sister is now sacrificing her life for the cross of Jesus! But she will understand that this fresh sacrifice can save her people in this land of theirs, before hell takes hold on us all", spat out the Bishop, an uncanny light once more flashing from his eyes.

"Hell? What hell are you talking about, monk from Rome?", asked Aluane of the Congani, returning to the attack.

"Watch your tongue, pagan barbarian! May the Lord graciously overlook your words. I have been sent from Rome for no other purpose than your salvation, and I have no time to listen to your insults!", shot back the Bishop.

The Cantabrians were furious. Hernando was shaking his head. Toribio had not expected so fiery a tone from a bishop of Rome. Then Pelayo raised his right hand to quieten the assembly.

"I understand, most illustrious Bishop", he said, "that a Christian must seek peace before taking up the sword, but we were at peace until these devils invaded our lands, burned down our houses and humiliated our womenfolk. Why should we be seeking peace now?"

The audience applauded his words, but the Bishop continued unabashed: "Pelayo of Toledo, they tell me you fought at the Rio Gades . . . so you should be quite familiar with those you refer to as devils!"

"That is true", replied the other, indicating the scars disfiguring his countenance.

"Then let me tell you that the Saracens arriving now are even more ferocious. They know that they are within a whisker of conquering the whole of Hispania and that, in a few months, when they have slaughtered you all like lambs, they will be able to devote themselves to the conquest of Gaul and, finally, cross the Alps and take Rome from the rear, just as Hannibal did a thousand years ago. Is this what you want? Do you desire the ruin of the Eternal City? You Goths, who were formerly her most loyal allies? You who fought on the Catalaunian Fields alongside General Aetius to halt Attila, the Scourge of God?", asked the cleric in inflated tones.

"What you say is perfectly true, Bishop . . . so why should we be alarmed now?", asked Duke Petro, who up to that point had said not a word, sitting quietly at his table.

"Because these people are not pagans; they, too, believe in one God! They accept Jesus as a prophet and are prepared to respect our religion. They are not evil like Attila", replied the bishop.

A ripple of dissent ran through the audience. The Cantabrians were infuriated by these insults, but the Asturians, many of whom were only recently converted, were confused and uncertain.

Pelayo remained silent and thoughtful, his chin resting on his right fist. Then suddenly he rose, stood down from the dais and approached the Bishop. He was almost double the bishop's height, like a tower beside a straw stack.

"Are you really here to bless us, Bishop Astasio?", he asked, looking him straight in the eye.

The cleric took a step backwards and replied: "Do you think it is not my intention to do so?"

"Why then are you discouraging us to the point of asking for my sister's virginity as a way of surrendering to those devils?", replied the Visigoth warily.

"I am as concerned for your sister's chastity as for the peace of all Hispania, brother Pelayo. By this marriage, you could save both . . . The Berbers respect their womenfolk . . . and peace would be for the benefit of us all. Are you not tired of so many years of pointless battles?", insisted the Bishop.

"We are prepared to fight to the bitter end", replied Pelayo. "If there is no alternative."

"There is an alternative—the way of negotiation. A good marriage might well satisfy Munuza, who could intercede for you with General Tariq and Emir Musa. And you could retain your freedom, just as you desire . . . then if the Saracens still insist on hounding you from your lands, you can always revolt! And I shall be on your side."

"And what if the Saracens do not keep their word, but continue advancing on Rome as you have said, what shall we do then? By then it will be too late, and I shall have lost a beloved sister in the process", objected Pelayo.

"What I described to you earlier was the worst possible scenario, but I do not really believe they would be able to beat the Franks as easily as they beat you on the Rio Gades. Already the Vasconians seem to be holding their own with honour. If we can secure peace with them, maybe they will call a permanent halt and won't disturb anybody else . . . then, as the years go by, their blood will be completely absorbed among you. After all, that was the case with the Romans, and you yourselves have become integrated with those who were here before you. Why be so afraid?", urged the bishop, trying to turn the argument.

"First you describe them as bloodthirsty monsters preparing to march on Rome, then you depict them as lambs, ready to care for our children provided we let them have our womenfolk. For Jupiter's sake . . . Bishop my arse! What are you trying to get us to do?", swore an individual in the audience, a man wearing a leather helmet with a plume of crow's feathers. Toribio was dismayed.

"Take care, man of violence. This is not the language in which to address a bishop of Rome!", replied Astasio.

"Bishop or not, you may succeed in pulling the wool over the eyes of Visigoths and Asturians, but let me tell you that we Cantabrians are not such a push-over! First you offend us regarding our customs, and now you want us to stand by in silence while you procure a fresh concubine for that African dog!"

Pelayo looked nervously at Petro. The latter made a sign to his brother-in-law, who swore and sat down again. Toribio was red with embarrassment.

"I see that for many of us your proposal is too difficult to accept", said Pelayo to the Bishop. "However, I want to leave the door open. The ways of wisdom are infinite and maybe there is something to be said for seeking negotiation . . . but I cannot swear it will be my sister who answers for us all! I first need to speak to her. We Visigoths do not exchange our women so casually!", he continued.

"Then let me bring this good intention of yours to the ears of the governor of Xixon, whom, as I told you, I shall be meeting tomorrow. I promise I will never commit your sister without your and her consent. I will simply report that you are ready to meet and hold peace talks. Does that seem a more fitting proposal?", asked the Bishop.

"Those are the words of a true ambassador. I can concur with such intentions, but a curse on anyone who mentions my sister, at least before I, and I alone, have had the opportunity to speak to her!", replied Pelayo.

The Asturians and Swabians now seemed persuaded that this approach was worth trying, but the Cantabrians were clearly opposed and began shouting defiance and slamming their fists down on the benches.

"Now listen to me!". The speaker was a middle-aged man with a bald head and thin, shrivelled face, like that of a hardened money-lender: Count Sancho, to everyone's great surprise.

"I am prepared to provide five thousand barrel of wine and honey, ten thousand sacks of oats, flour and salt, together with two hundred oxen and five thousand calves, in place of Duke Pelayo's sister, if this Munuza will leave our peoples in peace and the Saracens will refrain from invading our mountains. But I propose that a Cantabrian go with you to witness the meeting . . . then you will return here and all of us will decide together."

Pelayo seemed to find this a promising solution.

"Sancho is making a generous proposal, friends, and there is wisdom in his words. A Cantabrian will make a good witness, because your people have never learned to hate those monsters, as we Visigoths have, by the edge of the sword . . . And in the meanwhile we can make ourselves ready, in case the negotiations fail", said the exiled nobleman.

"But who, then, should we send with the Bishop?", asked Duke Petro.

"I am prepared to go myself", replied his cousin of San Emeterio,.

"At your age! And if they take you prisoner, what shall we do? Take possession of your estates?", asked Petro jokingly, to general laughter.

"That damned miser is hatching another plot to further his own interests!", grumbled Hernando in the Autrigonian dialect. Toribio looked at him: the same thought had crossed his mind.

"Sancho, it needs to be someone younger and less wealthy than you. They would demand an enormous ransom for you, if they should decide to betray the Bishop", reasoned Pelayo. Now the Cantabrian chiefs also seemed to be in agreement.

"Let me go!", said Toribio, rising to his feet.

The general reaction was one of surprise, many making comments on the young man's unexpected boldness. Hernando told him to sit down and shut his mouth, but Toribio remained standing at his bench.

"Yes, I'll go—I, Toribio Del Valle—on behalf of all the Cantabrians, and of the Visigoths, and I would also say the Vasconians, if Count Eneko were here, given that the blood of all these peoples runs in my veins!"

The hubbub increased. Indeed, it seemed to be the ideal solution, but Toribio's father was anything but pleased.

"Are you mad? What if they harm you? Let me go, Toribio! I'll deal with that mad dog of a womanising Berber!", he said.

"No father, it's time I showed my courage and became a man worthy of our lineage! Let me go!", insisted the son.

Hernando looked at him, shaking his head.

"Hernando", interrupted his brother-in-law Petro, "we must trust in the goodwill of a Bishop of Toledo! And maybe the negotiations will be successful and bloodshed will be averted, if we send an intelligent and wise young man like my nephew."

Hernando was still reluctant. He eyed the Bishop and spat on the ground. "Then pray to your God, dear Bishop. If a single hair of my son's head is harmed you will vanish for ever from the entire universe, because I shall track you down, even in hell. I will cut the guts from your belly and eat them in your sight, before gouging your eyes from your face with this knife of mine!!", he cried, red in the face, pointing his dagger at the cleric.

The Bishop looked at him, almost in amusement, and this irritated Hernando still further. He jumped down from his bench, preparing to assault him. "So you find my words funny, cursed monk?", spat out the Judge, as his neighbours made valiant efforts to restrain him by his harness.

"Calm down! Calm down, all of you!", yelled Petro. "Now let us vote by a show of hands . . . How many of you are satisfied that a Cantabrian should speak for us all?"

Obviously, all the Cantabrians, apart from Hernando, gave their assent, as did the Swabians and some of the Asturians, no doubt impressed by the courage of the young man from Valle de Autrigonia.

"Hernando's son will bring us good luck. You can see he is a man of courage, and wiser than his father!", thought the leaders among themselves.

Pelayo scrutinised Toribio attentively. "Well done, lad, my regard for you is increased. My wife told me you were a person of noble manners, like your mother, who was one of us, and at the same time proud—just as we are! I therefore appoint you *missus*!", pronounced the Duke. "You will

leave tomorrow with Bishop Astasio and return in two days at the latest to give an account of the response to Count Sancho's offer. If by the dawn of the third day you are not back, it will be war!!", thundered Pelayo, turning his eyes on the Bishop.

The latter gave a sign of acquiescence, then looked at the youngster from Valle and his father, who was still observing him askance.

"I shall do my very best!", swore the prelate, his hand on his chest.

Thus Toribio was chosen as witness for four peoples and, in the company of Bishop Astasio, set out for Xixon in the early hours of 30 April of that fateful year.

CHAPTER X

THE GOVERNOR OF XIXON

Well before dawn, the bishop's coach was already threading its way through the narrow roads of the Asturian mountains. The flares carried by the riders of his escort punctuated the darkness of woodland and thicket like will o' the wisps in the pale moonlight. Toribio galloped along on the right side of the coach, followed by three Asturian warriors armed with lances and round shields painted with the bear emblem. The young man felt the morning chill creeping in under his felt jerkin and penetrating his skin like the filaments of a wire curry-comb. But icier still was the touch of the cross on his chest.

Towards the first hour of the day, the group reached the village of Infiesto on the banks of the Rio Pilonia, where the inhabitants were still sleeping peacefully in huts and hovels raised on wooden piles. They passed rapidly between the dwellings, just as the cocks were beginning to crow, and crossed a solid bridge of pine trunks. The studded wheels of the coach thundered over them like a rapid drumbeat but, before even a dog could wake and begin barking, the coach and its escort had vanished back into the forest. When they reached the confluence of the Rio Asta and the Rouna, the sky was beginning to be tinged with pink, the moon becoming paler in the dawning light. They were just a few miles from the first defence works of the Asturian border. Then they would come to Villa Vitiosa, would take the road towards the sea and, having passed the last defensive barrier, leave Christian territory.

The driver of the coach, a lad with a moustache, pale face and long hair, hauled on the reins to slow the pace of the draught-horses. Toribio approached and asked if anything was wrong.

"Bishop's orders", replied the other without looking at him.

"Don't worry, young Toribio, we have time in hand; there is no need to go any faster", called a soft little voice from behind him. The fat unshaven

face of the priest stood out from the edge of the purple curtain covering the window, as if disembodied.

"If that is your pleasure, I am your obedient servant", replied Toribio, signalling to the rest of the escort to slow down, at the same time keeping within earshot of the bishop.

"You seem to be a well-mannered young man", added the disproportionately large face. "Very different in temper from your father!"

"My father is judge of a mountain community, but he is wiser and kinder than at first appears. Forgive his rough manners, but he loves me and does not want me to come to harm."

"Have no fear, young man. It is not my intention to give you over to any demon," replied the other with an unpleasant laugh, "but tell me: where did you receive your education?"

"At Amaya, at the school of monk Valerio of Byzantium, who taught me Latin and Greek", replied the youth from Valle proudly.

"Oooh! Amaya! The city of Duke Petro, if I am not mistaken!", exclaimed the Bishop, whose face seemed to have swollen even larger.

"That's quite right. Do you know it?"

"No, I have never travelled in those parts, but I have been told it is an ancient city and still has Roman temples and forums."

"There are also churches and basilicas", added Toribio, a little surprised that the Bishop should not have referred to them first.

"Tell me, then, what good teachings did you receive from this tutor of yours from Byzantium?", asked Astasio.

"So many things . . . it's difficult to summarise them in a few words . . . I began attending his courses when I was thirteen years old", explained Toribio hesitantly.

"Of course, I'm sure it would take from sunrise to sunset to tell me the half of it", Astasio reassured him, "but if you had to choose the three most important things you learned, what would they be?"

"I would reply that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are *Unus et Trinus*, that Mary conceived Jesus as a virgin, and . . .", here Toribio paused, sensing the warmth of the cross, ". . . that there are four gospels: Matthaeus, Johannes, Marcus and Luca. All the rest is empty talk and apostasy!", he concluded with a frown.

The Bishop did not seem impressed: "Standard doctrines, but would you be able to defend them with persuasive arguments?"

Toribio was nonplussed. Was there any need to discuss the obvious?

"Let's begin with your first affirmation", continued the other. "Are you familiar with the doctrines of Arius, Nestorius, the monk Eutike and the Patriarch Sergius, who imposed the Ectesis?"

"No, sir. Forgive my ignorance . . . I know only a little of what they tell of Arius. I have never heard the other names."

The big face in front of him laughed: "And what do you know about Arius?"

"I know he denied that Jesus was God incarnate. He believed he was a created being, above all others, but not one in person with the Father."

"That's right, but what do you believe?"

"I believe what was established at Nicaea, and is repeated whenever we say the creed: v*ery God of very god, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father . . .*"

The Bishop listened carefully. When Toribio came to the end of the creed, he said: "I really admire your faith, young man, but you were not at Nicaea, nor at Ephesus, a hundred years later, when they debated the theory of Nestorius, who said that Jesus was of two natures, one divine and one human; and you are too young to have heard the monk Eutike, who posited but one—divine—nature; and too young to know of the doctrine of the single will, that was re-affirmed at Constantinople more than thirty years ago!"

Toribio was confused. It was almost like undergoing an oral examination with one of his teachers at Amaya.

"That's what I was taught by Valerio, my tutor", he concluded. Then a doubt came into his mind. "And you, were you at Nicaea? That would make you hundreds of years old!", he remarked, before realising that he might be coming across as ill-mannered.

But the Bishop said nothing. Toribio merely noted a malevolent flash of his eyes.

"That Valerio of yours has taught you a great deal . . . but what about the four gospels? How would you demonstrate that there are no others?", resumed Astasio.

"I know there are apocryphal ones, written too long after the death of Jesus, but a true Christian must rely only on the testimony of those who really lived at that time."

The Bishop seemed taken aback. "But not all four of them were apostles!"

"True, Matthaeus and Johannes were, but Marcus was a pupil of Petrus and Luca a disciple of Paulus , and they gathered the earliest eye-witness accounts in order to disseminate them in Greece and in the East."

"And why do we know nothing about the others? They could have written their own gospels, couldn't they?"

To Toribio this seemed a strange observation. "I don't know how to reply", he answered. "I have only read those of which I was taught by the Church."

The Bishop appeared satisfied. His face seemed to withdraw from the window.

"You are well-educated, young sir, but always allow doubt to stand alongside the truth, because the witness of men is never entirely trustworthy", commented the priest.

Toribio remained silent. He did not understand the sense of this. The cross was cold as ice. He felt a pang of fear, but was not tempted to have the last word. Instinctively he slowed his pace and looked straight ahead. They had reached the first defensive perimeter. Down the valley they could make out the towers of Villa Vitiosa. Time was now getting on, maybe it was the third hour of the day, and he was hungry.

Their party did not go through the town. Showing the pass signed by Pelayo, they quickly satisfied the guards at the first barrier and took the road north, towards the coast, following the banks of the Rio Asta.

They reached the sea an hour later and there, in a fishing village, stopped for some refreshment. The air was cool and the sun shone low over the sea. A beach of white sand stretched away, dotted with boats and fishing nets, as far as the orange-coloured cliffs of a pine-clad promontory. Toribio was awed by the sight, so he drew aside and prayed the Lord's Prayer in silence. He then ate a piece of flat bread given him by Gaudiosa's servants and drank some goat's milk. The Asturians guzzled wine from leather flasks and ate some dried sheep's meat. The Bishop consumed a modest repast with the driver: walnuts, cheese and scampi fritters, which some of the old women of the place had given the party in exchange for a blessing.

Then they resumed their journey and the Bishop continued his interrogation of Toribio.

"Have you a lady love, young fellow?", he asked, again leaning out of the window.

"No, I have never spent much time with women", replied Toribio, slightly embarrassed.

The Bishop laughed again. "Strange! You seem quite old enough to be married . . . I don't believe it! Tell me the truth. I have helped many a young fellow like you to secure a good dowry."

"I'm not sure I know what it means to fall in love. Certainly, I have met some beautiful and attractive girls, but how can I know if my feelings are reciprocated?", asked Toribio, feigning ingenuousness.

The Bishop was not taken in. "Come, come, Toribio, you must have seen the light of desire in their eyes! Do you mean to tell me you cannot distinguish a woman who lusts after you from one who doesn't give you a second thought?"

Toribio saw Agasinda in his mind's eye. The Bishop cottoned on to the fact.

"There is somebody! I can read you as clear as day. Who is she?", he asked, lowering his voice.

"You know . . . that daughter of Pelayo's . . . the fifteen year old . . .", conceded Toribio.

"Ahaa! So she's the one who has won your heart, is she?", broke in Astasio.

"I first met her just a few days ago, at her house, when I was a guest of her mother, *domna* Gaudiosa."

"And I imagine you fell in love at first sight, did you not?"

"I don't know. Maybe it is just a friendship. There is so much I still have to learn about women!", replied the lad from Valle.

The bishop looked at him as if he were a child.

"Women are all the same and yet different. They desire men, but each falls in love in her own way. They do not have the depth of heart of a man. They are often motivated by calculation and suspicion. They find it difficult to trust at first . . . You know why I am telling you this?"

"No."

"Women are condemned to give birth and to love their children more than their husbands. Since they need to consider the quality of their investment, the wiser ones think carefully before giving themselves to the first man to turn up on their doorstep", explained the prelate.

Toribio was not overly happy with this revelation. He certainly did not want to give his heart to a creature who saw him merely as a means of having children. But then he realised that something did not add up.

"Children should be the crowning glory of love between husband and wife; what harm is there if a woman wants them by a man who is worthy of her?", he countered.

The Bishop seemed surprised. "Well said, Toribio, but do not deceive yourself. Women are more cunning than the devil. A young man like you will get eaten alive!", he replied with an unpleasant little laugh.

Toribio was put off but said nothing.

"Will you be seeing her again?", asked the Bishop.

"I don't know. She told me she has to join her aunt Verosinda at the abbey of Santa Maria de Monsacri before the wedding of her brother at San Martín de Turieno on the second Sunday of May . . .", replied the young man. At that very moment, he felt the cross vibrate. "Maybe I should not be telling you these things. After all, I am only here as your witness", he added.

The Bishop, however, seemed even more interested than before. There was a period of silence, then: "Describe her to me", he said, gazing into the distance.

"Why are you so interested? We are not here to negotiate the terms of her marriage!", said Toribio hurriedly, suddenly anxious, as the cross beat a tattoo against his chest.

"Of course not. Rest assured. The Saracens want more mature women, I promise you. I'm just trying to understand if she is the right woman for you", he said by way of justification.

"She is beautiful as a lynx in the woods, with dark hair, brown eyes, full lips and fair complexion, like all the Visigoth women; she is as proud in bearing as her father, and thoughtful like him."

The Bishop was no longer looking at Toribio. His gaze was directed far into the distance.

"Well, young man, you have told me enough. Maybe she is the woman you are looking for, maybe not", he said.

"You don't seem to be much help."

"What can I say? She is the daughter of a duke. You are only the son of a judge. Don't build your hopes too high!"

Toribio was increasingly alienated by this conversation. He had had enough of the older man's insinuations, and made no reply.

"Take it from me", insisted the Bishop, "hitching yourself to just one woman is bad for the brain, and maybe also for the belly!"

Toribio felt faint. It was as if the blessing he desired was being denied him. Would Valerio have said the same? He could not believe it. But the Bishop did not enlarge. He ordered the driver to whip up the horses and drew the curtains, ignoring Toribio's feelings.

It was approaching the fifth hour. Further down the cart-way they could make out the towers and palisades of the last circle of fortifications. They would soon be venturing into hostile territory. The sky had clouded over and an icy wind was blowing off the sea. Toribio watched the waves—a new phenomenon for him—break on the shore as if to shake it. And now the border defences rose before his eyes. The ground bristled with stakes and posts. Guards occupied every nook and cranny, silent and motionless as statues. The convoy stopped at an enormous wooden gate. Above, on the ramparts, were posted Asturian archers and a flag flew, displaying the sign of the cross. Having examined their pass, two troopers wearing steel breastplates swung back the heavy doors. Over an arid barren plain could be seem the towers of Xixon, an enormous dome under construction, and an encampment of green, yellow and purple tents.

The coachman made for the tents. The tension was palpable. The horses seemed to move in slow motion, as if the ground itself were trying to suck them in. Time stood still between two obscure and hostile worlds, devoid of light or spirit. The cross on Toribio's chest trembled like a key debating whether or not to open an unfamiliar door. Little did the young man know how often in future his race would feel the same heaviness when confronting the unknown. Just as his descendants were fated to do, he experienced a mysterious, solemn doubt: would he be on God's side or against Him? But his emotions were soon dampened by the sound of human voices. The Berber sentinels gave a shout and, in response, a squad of blue-clad archers, their helmets crowning white turbans, came towards them.

After exchanging a few words with the Bishop, the archers escorted them to the governor's residence, which stood on a cliff-top. From the road, they could see the harbour and a long narrow causeway leading to the lighthouse. The harbour was full of Arab sailing vessels and lighters, some Byzantine dromons and a few Roman liburnae. Having dismounted, the soldiers of their escort were admitted with the Bishop to the interior of Munuza's residence. Men-at-arms were everywhere, garbed in leather and chain mail over blue tunics, white puff-legged trousers and tight

knee-length boots, all topped by a white turban and pointed helmet. Toribio noted that their shields were different, smaller and made of cane with iron hooping, while the blades of their swords were slightly curved. There were also many bare-chested servants, armed with short stabbing swords and maces, which they wore in their belts.

The Berber archers left them on the threshold of a vast reception room, whose glazed ogee windows admitted the cold light of an ash-grey sky. Spread on the floor were enormous carpets depicting the signs of the zodiac and configurations of the heavenly bodies. At the far end, on a platform covered in cushions and surrounded by red and gold curtains, sitting cross-legged, was the Saracen governor. He was wearing a long tunic of light blue brocade with orange slashes, embroidered with stars and moon shapes. The outfit was completed by a silver sash, red waistcoat and large turban, again light blue. He, too, wore leather boots up to the knees of his white breeches, but was unarmed. His chestnut-coloured skin was well cared for, his slightly pear-shaped face adorned with a lightly defined moustache and goatee beard. Lively eyes were set on either side of a prominent nose. A handsome young man, one would have said, were the illusion not betrayed by a few white locks which strayed from under the edge of his voluminous turban.

The Bishop prostrated himself at Munuza's feet. The governor barely bowed his head as a sign of respect, then looked up and scrutinised the Bishop's escort: first the Asturians, then the young man from Valle.

"You are welcome, lords of Hispania", he began in passable Latin. "So, what news do you bring me?", he asked, turning to the Bishop.

"Good news, your Excellency, from Duke Pelayo and his men, gathered in the Asturias", replied the prelate, rising to his feet.

Munuza looked at him attentively: "Will it be negotiation, or are they determined to fight?", asked the Berber, cutting him short.

"Negotiation, negotiation . . . I assure you, your Magnificence!", replied the Bishop.

Toribio did not like all this bowing and scraping. After all, Munuza was an invader.

The bishop continued: "I have come hot foot to tell you the decisions of the council the Duke has held with the Asturian and Cantabrian leaders. They undertake, on the word of the Count of San Emeterio, to provide you with wine and honey, oats, flour and salt, and oxen, calves and mares in abundance, if you agree not to attack them!"

Munuza looked him up and down, visibly perplexed.

"Tell me, monk, do you really think that my people are in need of food and drink? Do you really think we have suffered all these hardships, far from our lands in Africa, which are rich in crops and livestock, to barter a few amphorae of wine or jars of garum sauce", asked the Berber in a disdainful tone.

The Bishop kept his eyes down. "Of course not, Magnificence! But if I tell you the quantities, maybe you will be pleased to save on your bill for victuals, rather than bear the cost of years of warfare."

"Years!", interrupted the other. "You must be pulling my leg! We can defeat that handful of Iberians in just a few weeks, then the way to Aquitaine and Provence will be open! Surely you and your fugitive Pelayo are not trying to convince me I should be satisfied with a few sausages!", scoffed Munuza with a sarcastic laugh.

The Bishop raised his head and said meekly: "This is the most I have been able to secure for you."

Munuza surveyed him silently. "And what about those Visigoth women whose beauty is so highly prized? What of them, ambassador?"

Toribio was puzzled: why was the Berber using the plural?

"Duke Pelayo is not minded to hand over his sister Verosinda. She is already in a convent, devoted and espoused to Jesus Christ", replied the Bishop.

"Really! Espoused to a prophet who died seven hundred years ago, and so married to nobody, Bishop Astasio . . . Be serious! Don't insult my faith! You know very well that we are Muslims. My grandfather knew the Prophet Mohamed, and it is he who gave us the truth. Don't try and confuse me!", he said abruptly.

Then slowly, with a look of feline cunning, he resumed: "They tell me she is very beautiful and proud! She will be welcomed into my harem with all due respect, and I will give her what all women long for!"

Toribio was already offended by these shameless words, as were the horsemen of the bishop's escort.

"Actually", continued the Berber, "I want both her and her niece, that Agasinda I've heard so much about, the young chestnut-eyed filly. I would gladly take her into my bed for a full twelve moons!", he said, then laughed with the excitement and anticipation of a child.

"Never on your life!", yelled the young man from Valle.

Munuza looked at him wide-eyed. Toribio's hand was already on the hilt of his weapon. "A curse on you, Berber, if you even dare think of touching that woman!", he said.

The Bishop made as if to calm him down. The governor, meanwhile, summoned the guards from the back of the room. The Asturians took up position facing them and drew their swords. There were eight guards, well-built men, with long scimitars and small cane-work shields. In just a few seconds, the Asturians had wounded three of them and were about to attack the others, when Toribio leaped up onto the governor's platform and, quick as a cat, held his dagger to Munuza's throat. "Do I have to repeat it, Berber, or do you want to go and join your prophet this instant?"

The blood had drained from the governor's face. The Bishop was stretched out on the ground, immobile, like a snake stunned by a blow from a stick. The guards managed to run through two of the Asturians and surrounded the third, who lowered his sword.

"And what now, young Visigoth?", murmured Munuza, who could still feel the blade pressed to his throat. The guards slaughtered the Asturian who had surrendered. Then Toribio felt an unbearable heat run up through his chest. The cross seemed to have entered his ribcage and was pressing his heart. He felt that he must utter a prayer immediately. He began reciting *Rejoice, eternally Virgin Bride!* Suddenly, from his chest emanated rays of red light that flooded the room and dazzled those present.

Toribio continued:

Rejoice, radiance that enlightens men's souls;
Rejoice, joy of all generations;
Rejoice, dwelling of the infinite God;
Rejoice, One at whom the angels marvel.

A mighty wind suddenly smashed the windows and swept into the room, immobilising the Saracen guards.

Rejoice, voice of the Apostles never silent;
Rejoice, awesome slayer of demons;
Rejoice, defence against invisible enemies;
Rejoice, through you the curse is broken.

Munuza was terrified, the Bishop astounded, but Toribio did not stop for a moment:

Rejoice, because you restore men's souls;
Rejoice, because you bring reconciliation where there is discord;

Rejoice, because you plundered the kingdom of the dead;
Rejoice, because through you comes the blazing light.

Twelve towering angels in golden armour appeared beside the guards, disarmed them as if they were children, and swept them away like ash blown by a bellows. The Bishop dared not look them in the eyes, while Munuza could have been taken for a marble statue.

Rejoice, eternally Virgin Bride!, concluded the young man.

The angels lifted him up and bore him away with them, vanishing into thin air. Munuza and the Bishop were left alone.

There was a long silence.

"By all the devils in hell, Bishop, what was that?", stammered the governor, whose face was as white as his breeches.

Astasio's head seemed to have shrunk to the size of a dried plum. But his eyes were soon lit by a devilish look. He murmured some curses in a language which the governor barely recognised . . . maybe Greek, maybe Aramaic . . .

"Answer me, Bishop, what magic is this? Are you betraying me?", he began, his voice gaining strength.

"Betraying whom? An African beggar like you?", replied the Bishop whose head has begun to swell again. Munuza looked at him speechless.

"That boy was a carrier. Don't you understand what game is being played out here?", continued the Bishop.

"What carrier? What are you talking about? What do you mean? Who are you?", asked the Berber, fear taking hold of him again.

The Bishop's head was growing bigger and bigger, and his clothes seemed to burn with a greenish light. "Listen to me carefully, governor on behalf of Tariq ibn Ziyad!", he thundered. "I will give you all the women you desire and make you as great as the Emir Musa, and even greater, if you will obey my instructions!"

Munuza recovered his composure and listened carefully.

"Choose three of your best horsemen, arm them well, and send them off tonight in a small boat. Tell the helmsman to steer for the Bay of Betanzos. There I will wait for them and will lead them through Galicia and the Monsacri of the Asturias to the Abbey of Santa Maria. You shall have those women before the moon is full!"

"Why not go by land? Can I not send a squad of well-armoured infantry and seize them from the abbey myself?", argued the Berber.

"Obey my instructions and you will have those women! Do it your way and you will lose everything", replied Astasio, the skin of whose face now seemed to be of yellowish scales.

Munuza held his tongue.

"In the end, I will make you Emir, then you will be my brother for evermore, future governor of Africa!"

Munuza was frightened by what he perceived to be a supernatural being, but the promise of so much power was irresistible. Already he could see himself in a luxurious palace in Kairouan, amid gardens and avenues of palm trees, pools of water and sparkling fountains, receiving homage from important people from all over the world, and being fed and indulged by gorgeous young women.

"I will obey, my lord", he said and bowed down at the other's feet.

His will was broken, totally corrupted by the demon Oppa.

CHAPTER XI

PREPARATIONS FOR DEFENCE

Hernando was worried at his son's delay: two days should have been more than enough to wrap up the peace negotiations, but more than three had gone by. Valerio had shut himself in his room, where he spent all his time in prayer and fasting. Gaudiosa sent Agasinda off to her aunt, at Santa Maria de Monsacri, then gathered all the people of the area to the little orange church on the road to Cangas, asking them to pray for peace. Duke Petro even proposed a procession along the avenue dedicated to the Twelve Apostles.

On the morning of the third day, Pelayo sent his spatharii to summon everybody to come to the old Legates' Place when the shadows lengthened towards vespers. Only then was Gaudiosa able to persuade Valerio to leave his room and attend court to bless their deliberations. The atmosphere was truly depressing.

"I have been having nightmares", the Duchess told the monk. "There is going to be a hellish battle and I fear they will kill us all!", she sobbed, while the monk clasped her hands to his chest.

But their destiny was by no means so straightforward, as Valerio was well aware.

As the sun began to set, the Asturian warriors, Cantabrian chiefs, Visigoth soldiers and Swabian counts made their way to the old red palace. The façade was lit by dozens of torches set in brackets beneath the marble capitals of the towering atrium before the main door. A crowd of people had gathered. All knew of Toribio's mission and could not wait to learn the outcome. Pelayo arrived early, escorted by his son, the twelve spatharii and a number of servants, who began distributing beer and rye, spelt and barley bread, while another retainer, tall, fat and bald, cooked *pulmentaria* in a large cauldron over an open fire. Many of the peasantry, however, had brought food and wine from home, not wanting to eat into the provisions intended to sustain their soldiers.

The session began, lit by oil lanterns that the servants had placed on the benches of the amphitheatre and a gigantic brazier set up in front of the ducal baldachin. Pelayo sat down, flanked by Fafila on his right and Duke Petro on his left. The assembly watched the old Visigoth warlord in silence.

"What about my son?", asked the Judge from Valle, breaking the silence.

Valerio was hunched on his knees by his bench, still praying. Pelayo slowly raised his eyes to meet the burning gaze of Duke Petro's brother-in-law. Petro did not dare look at him.

"Well, then?", repeated the Judge. "What news of this negotiation you were so keen on, Duke Pelayo? Three nights have passed; what are we going to do?", he insisted.

Pelayo seemed paralysed, not only by the possibility of Petro's brother-in-law losing his son, but also because the negotiations might have failed. That would mean war, undoubtedly an uneven struggle against forces at least two or three times as numerous as their own. The Duke was barely aware of the Autrigonian's angry questions. In his mind, he was going over all points at which Asturian territory could be defended: the fortifications of Villa Vitiosa, Nava, Villa Flaviana and Ponte Rouna, the garrisons of the Rio Pilonia and Rio Marea valleys, those of Lake Tanes, the Rio Alba, the Caleao and the Nalón and, further down, beyond the Rouna Mountains, those of the Maddalena Pass, the three Corona passes and the Reina Pass.

He imagined that the bulk of the Saracen army would come via Nava. If Nava was overrun, they would then advance on Villa Maior, and from there they could reach Cangas in a few hours. But would they not expect most of his troops to be stationed there? In that case, they might break through at Villa Flaviana and, having worked their way round Lake Tanes and crossed the mountains, would be free to descend on them from the Rio Pilonia and Rio Tendi valleys. Or maybe not . . . maybe they would attack from the sea, straight from the mouth of the Rio Asta, possibly assisted by Munuza's Berber vanguard.

And what if they were to take the more southern route, via the three passes of the Corona? Difficult . . . The forts guarding those passes were well defended and the whole area was inhabited by Doidero's Vadinensi, who were sure to resist and could be supported by Visigoth troops from nearby Amaya. And then there was the bishop's assertion that they would

attack from the West, and quite likely also from the sea, but not from the South. And what if the Bishop were mistaken? And supposing the Vasconians betrayed them? Only then did Pelayo realise that it was quite impossible to predict the enemy's moves. God alone could help him.

"Well then, Pelayo, what good has come of that Roman cleric's proposals?", asked Hernando again, at last distracting the Duke from his reflections.

This time, the Duke looked at him, but with a smile:

"Bless you, Judge of Valle, for having a son so noble as to bear the burden for us all! Maybe this is the providential sign I have been looking for."

The Judge was brought up sharp by this reply. Valerio stopped praying and looked at the Duke.

"What do you mean?", asked Petro, also very concerned, fixing his gaze on Pelayo.

The latter rose, walked towards the great brazier, stared at the fire for a few moments, then turned to the assembled company. "I have a feeling that the boy will return!", he said. "But I cannot predict what news he will bring! In any case, do not lose heart! As I told the Bishop . . . if they are not here after three days, it will be war!".

Those present murmured among themselves. Many understood and were prepared for this eventuality, but some still hoped for peace.

Valerio returned to his prayers. Pelayo then turned to Petro, as if to indicate that he had not forgotten his earlier question.

"*Domne* Petro, how many men have you still got in Amaya?", he asked.

"No more than a thousand", Petro replied, "and we shall certainly not be able to cope on our own!"

"Do you think what Astasio told us was correct?", asked Pelayo again.

Petro thought carefully. "He knew a lot about those devils, he had come from Toledo, he knows Tariq and Munuza . . . but . . . maybe it is best to act with caution. I would be amazed if the Arabs and Berbers confided so much in a man of our church", he replied, increasingly confirmed in his doubts. Then he added: "I would also consider the possibility of an attack from the south. Amaya is a difficult stronghold for them to take, but they would split us down the middle if they could defeat us there".

"Quite right, Duke Petro, that is just what I was thinking, too", replied Pelayo.

At this point, there was a further outburst from Hernando: "I would not give the mangiest of my dogs to that straw Bishop of yours! I never liked the look of him, and to cap it all you wouldn't listen to me! You gave him my son, you scoundrels!"

His brother-in-law beseeched him to calm down. Valerio stood up and tried to place his hand on his shoulder.

"And you keep away from me, too, monk of Byzantium! This is what happens when one trusts in your god!", cried the Judge.

He was furious. His companions on the neighbouring benches also began to murmur their dissent. For those converted to Christianity, this was blasphemy, but the Cantabrian chieftains were sympathetic. Many of them were now wondering if it had not been foolish to trust a churchman in so important a negotiation. Suddenly, Virone stood up from his bench and went to sit next to Hernando. Immediately the other Cantabrian leaders followed suit. The assembly was divided, Christians against pagans, some for, some against the Bishop.

Valerio seemed to understand that something deeper was at stake, the manifestation of an evil far more powerful than the Saracen threat, something of which these fighting men could not be aware. But he preferred not to intervene and simply prayed in silence, while the Cantabrians addressed their protests to the Visigoth dukes. The later had returned to their seats, discouraged, feeling they had nothing more to say. Anger was mounting and Hernando began casting hostile glances in the direction of Sancho, who meanwhile had moved away and gone to join the Swabians. The Asturians, too, seemed to be on edge and began insulting the Cantabrians. They were on the verge of an all-out brawl when suddenly the heralds' trumpets sounded and everyone turned towards the entrance.

Down there, emerging from a crowd of peasants, share-croppers, older folk, women and children, they made out the figure of a boy supported by a Visigoth soldier, tired out, his eyes glazed by lack of sleep. There was dirt and fragments of leaves in his blond hair, and twigs stuck under the fine silver headband he was wearing. His face was unshaven, his green jerkin bedaubed with mud, but he showed no sign of fear.

With his left hand pressing on his lion buckle and his right on the hilt of his sword, he staggered towards his father.

"They have killed them all!", he said, and immediately passed out.

The whole company was in shock. Duke Petro rose from his chair and ordered the soldiers supporting Toribio to take him to Duchess Gaudiosa. Hernando and Valerio hurried after them. Pelayo, too, was on his feet, dumbfounded, as was his son Fafila and the rest of the assembly, all shouting in total confusion. The old soldier then raised his right hand and the hubbub died down.

"Listen, men of Hispania, whom destiny has gathered here in this bleak moment of our history. Clearly, peace is not possible and we must defend ourselves to the last drop of blood", he began in a tone that was sorrowful but not lacking in determination.

"There are almost six thousand of us here, right? Well then, it is time to send messengers to the western garrisons, to the fortifications of Villa Vitiosa, Nava, Villa Flaviana and Ponte Rouna, and to the forts at the Maddalena Pass, the three passes of the Corona and the Reina Pass. We will also send messages to the guard towers on the coast at Colunga, Riva de Sella and Lanes. You, Sancho of San Emeterio . . .", here he looked at the Count, who was seated with the Swabians, "will look after the Cantabrian garrisons. Meanwhile, I ask you, Cantabrian chieftains, to muster your finest young men, as you have promised to do, and put them under our command."

The Cantabrians listened and nodded their assent. The Duke then turned to Xilo, leader of the Asturians.

"I would ask you, valorous Xilo, to transfer five hundred men to Duke Petro for the defence of Amaya. Fafila! You will take a further three hundred of our own men, attend to the southern garrisons, then wait for me at San Martín until your wedding in seven days' time. You can take Froliuba with you. I, meanwhile, will visit the western garrisons. Then, after the wedding, I will accompany you all to the Reina Pass . . . which is the highest point and I want to see it for myself . . ."

"Then the five hundred Asturians will follow Duke Petro to Amaya and there join forces with his guard of a thousand men. That means we shall have two thousand five hundred Asturians, two hundred Swabians and one thousand two hundred of my own horsemen to defend the western and coastal fortifications, a thousand Cantabrians, or so I hope, to cover our backs, three hundred men under the command of my son for the southern passes and one thousand five hundred with Duke Petro to defend his city. Is that clear?"

Fafila was radiant: at last, an opportunity to prove his worth. The Cantabrians, too, seemed happy, as was Count Sancho, who was not required to expose himself directly and had only to keep his troops where they were. Only the Asturians appeared perplexed. Old Xilo spoke up for them: "Good Duke, I am willing to carry out your orders, but will it not be dangerous to reduce the western garrisons, given what the Bishop of Toledo told us?"

Pelayo looked at Petro, who understood his thinking and spoke on his behalf.

"I, too, heard the Bishop's words, but if we lose Amaya, you too will be vulnerable from the rear. We cannot count on the loyalty of the Vasconians, as we have seen, and we must act wisely. However, I still believe the Bishop's words can be trusted: if he has spoken truly and no one attacks from the south, we shall still have time to get your men back to the Asturias. It takes about three days at a good gallop and, in the interim, you can always count on the Cantabrian forces."

Xilo looked at the Cantabrians, with whom they had been at daggers drawn only a few moments before. Virone spoke up for them: "Xilo of the Luggoni, I swear we will cover the backs of your men, have no fear. Forgive the ill feeling . . . We will not let our different faiths come between us . . . If the gods so wish, we will acquit ourselves well and they will leave us in peace for a long time. I swear to you that, if this comes about, I will ask Erudino to protect your god, too, and I promise to organise a seven-day banquet in his honour!"

Xilo's response was immediate: he rose from his bench and shook hands with Virone. The two men exchanged daggers, while their companions applauded. An alliance had been forged. Not since the wars of the Emperor Octavian had Asturians and Cantabrians come together to fight a common foe. Xilo exchanged a few words in the Luggonian dialect with a young man of about twenty, with dark hair and a short beard. The latter listened reverently to the old leader, then placed his right hand on his breast. Xilo then turned to address Duke Petro: "Right then, I shall send you five hundred men under the command of Bartuelo of the Arcadeuni, whom you see here beside me."

Petro thanked him and looked towards Pelayo again. The Visigoth leader then turned to the Swabians: "And you last of all, honourable counts of Swabia, are you with us?"

"We always shall be, and we put our old disagreements behind us. We shall all be united in defence of our dear Hispania!", replied Ricimir, supported by counts Gildimir and Filimir, who like him were thirsty to avenge the slaughter of their people. There had been enmity between Swabians and Visigoths since the wars of King Liuvigild and King Malaric, one hundred and fifty years earlier. But now, with the Muslim enemy breathing down their necks, everyone seemed to understand that only unity could save them from destruction. Holding aloof was not only cowardly, but an act of supreme folly.

Toribio woke up in the big bed where Gaudiosa had laid him. She was leaning over him, holding his left hand and praying. Valerio offered him an infusion of honey and rosemary. Toribio drank it and felt his senses marvellously restored. It was then that he noticed his father, sitting in a big chair at the foot of the bed.

"They killed them all", he uttered weakly.

"Are you talking about the guards?", asked his father.

"Yes, our three guards . . . they butchered them. The Bishop, maybe, maybe not. I don't remember seeing him dead . . . but he was left there, poor man!", replied the youngster.

"And how did you manage to escape, my child?", asked Gaudiosa, caressing his tear-stained cheeks. "Angels carried me away! They were so tall and beautiful, maybe a dozen of them. None of those Berbers could stop them!", replied Toribio.

Gaudiosa and Hernando exchanged glances, but Valerio kept his eyes down. He knew.

"He is delirious. My son is still in a daze! He is having delusions!", said Hernando.

"No, good Judge, possibly not! But now he needs rest . . . It is best that I watch over him alone . . . trust me!", the monk tried to reassure him.

Gaudiosa looked again at Hernando, who accepted her silent invitation to leave the room with her. Valerio was left alone with the younger Del Valle.

"It was the cross!", whispered Toribio, as soon as their footsteps had died away in the corridor. "A most beautiful light, first red, then green, then silver. They carried me away to an unforgettable place, where I saw St. Jacobus again, as well as St. Johannes, St. Matthaeus and St. Marcus. They told me who they were and made me drink the purest water and eat bread so good that I will never forget the taste as long as I live. Then St.

Jacobus kissed my cross, which was magically transformed into the face of Jesus, covered with blood and thorns, who looked at me with a smile. Then Jesus was replaced by a huge eagle and St. Johannes stroked its wings and prophesied that there would be a great battle . . . but this was only the beginning of a story that would go on for thirteen centuries."

"Finally, St. Marcus told me that a lion, his lion, would always be at our side and watch over our race, now and in the future, when the twelve gemstones will come to light in all parts of the continent . . . from the icy lands north of Britannia to the shores of Gaul . . . from Alamannia down to the remotest Italian Alps, where, in two centuries time, the Del Valles will build a castle. From here, the story of the twelve gemstones will continue via Rome and Byzantium . . . . then to Persia, to Indian and on to the farthest East, where there are people with almond-shaped eyes whom we have never seen . . . And, finally, it will continue in a land across the ocean, which will be called America", revealed Toribio.

Then he began to sob: "I also saw my mother! She was beautiful, attired in sky blue and gold, with clear skin and bright eyes . . . She hugged me to herself . . . and told me not to be afraid of anything . . . that one day we will all be together and no evil will ever again come between us. She told me my father will be with us, and will be different: what he truly is by nature, not the man he has become because of all the suffering he has had to bear . . .", said the young man before breaking off.

Valerio listened to him impassively.

"Sometimes I am too proud towards him", continued Toribio, as if taken up with a new concern, "I must make the effort to understand him . . . he has suffered things that few men could have borne. It does not matter that he still speaks of the pagan gods . . . one day he will understand."

Valerio watched him in silence, enthused by his account of events, which was undoubtedly familiar to him. "St. Johannes . . . Did he tell you who would win in the end?", asked the monk. Toribio looked back at him calmly. "Yes, and he asked me not to discuss it with anyone".

Valerio said nothing, but smiled sweetly at these words.

"As I told you, Toribio, all you need do is have faith and wait!", he said eventually.

Toribio nodded.

Just then Fafila arrived.

"Toribio, my friend, what happened to you? Are you well?", asked the young Visigoth, hurrying towards the bed.

"I'm much better now; Valerio's decoction has restored me to life!", replied the youngster from Valle, glancing at the monk.

"But tell me, what happened exactly?"

"As I have said, they killed our escort and, I think, the Bishop, too. I escaped death by divine providence. What else can I say?"

"It is a miracle, then!", exclaimed Fafila. "I was right in thinking that you are very precious to Our Lord".

Toribio again glanced towards Valerio, who kept his eyes on the ground.

"So, what will your father do? Will he postpone the wedding?", asked Toribio anxiously.

"No, the wedding will take place, have no fear. We shall leave all together for San Martín, and you and Valerio will accompany us. That's what you promised, isn't it?"

"If God has saved me for that alone, I am very grateful to him, my friend!", replied Toribio. "Valerio, will you officiate as you said you would?", he asked the monk.

"That is still my intention!", replied Valerio.

Fafila seemed relieved.

"And have they decided how we shall defend ourselves? I have now seen and heard that Berber . . . He is arrogant, a man who would stop at nothing . . . You know, he wanted your aunt and your sister . . .", said Toribio.

Fafila gave a start. "The pig! He will taste the edge of my sword twice over if he dares to touch Agasinda!"

Toribio was comforted by these words: "That is more or less what I told him; he'll never do it!"

"And what did the scoundrel reply?"

"He went as white as a sheet, and I am not surprised. What was surprising was the behaviour of the Bishop: he did not stand up to him . . . it was as if . . . I don't know, I can't believe it . . . as if he were egging him on in some way!", revealed Toribio.

"These city bishops! Sometimes they use ambiguous language, but I can't believe he would agree to such a vile suggestion!", replied the Visigoth thoughtfully.

Toribio, too, now seemed lost in doubt. Then he had a chilling presentiment

"Your sister has already left, hasn't she?"

"Yes, my mother has sent her to Santa Maria de Monsacri. Why? Didn't you know?"

"It would be better if you sent an escort of your men. I have a sense of foreboding . . . I mentioned it to the Bishop . . . He asked me questions about her, too . . . I never really understood why", said Toribio, embarrassed.

"It sounds strange to me, too, but maybe the shock of what happened to you down there is distorting your memory of earlier events", reflected Fafila, still not believing there could be any connection of the kind imagined by his friend.

"Maybe these are just irrational fears", continued Toribio, who did not want to declare his feelings for Agasinda, "but I am ready to protect your sister and your aunt on my own, if necessary. Why don't you suggest it to your father? With a squad of ten men, we can make sure they come to no harm until the day of your wedding. What do you think?"

Fafila looked at him, perplexed, then smiled slightly. He realised that he had missed something, but knew his sister had spent time alone with Toribio.

"I shall be honoured!", he replied, eyes open wide in his fawn-like face.

He had cottoned on. The pair started laughing and Valerio joined in.

"I'd better go and tell the servants to prepare you a decent bath", concluded Fafila as he went out of the room, the serious expression on his face barely concealing his amusement.

A little later, steps were again heard echoing in the corridor.

"And who would have thought he was on the point of death! I've never seen anyone looking so merry after escaping from the claws of a Saracen!", proclaimed a rich baritone.

It was his uncle's turn. He entered the room, accompanied by Hernando.

Petro personally handed him a tray with a cup of *pulmentaria* and a slab of acorn bread, while his father passed him a silver tankard of wine.

"You can pour away your friend's potions", said Hernando roughly, seeing the monk. "This has always been more efficacious than any herb, even for young daredevils like you, son! Now have you learned your lesson? You understand why I was against it?", he continued.

Valerio ignored the discourtesy and returned Toribio's beseeching look, raising his eyes to the ceiling.

While the young man ate and drank, his uncle wanted to know everything he could remember. Unfortunately, Toribio could only tell him about the soldiers he had seen and their weapons, but he could not give an accurate estimate of numbers.

"Swords with curved blades, then, and double-S-shaped bows? Of course, Pelayo has described them to me, the same weapons as the Arabs carry. They must get them from the same source, as when they fought on the Rio Gades", reflected the Duke of Amaya.

"That's true. I remember Gunderic telling me about them", added Hernando.

"That's not all. In the harbour, I saw dromons from Byzantium, with their purple banners", revealed Toribio. Then he described the rest of the meeting, albeit omitting the details of the miracle.

"Right!", concluded his uncle. "We have clearly been betrayed. Byzantium is supplying them behind our backs. What other conclusion can we draw?".

Hernando gritted his teeth and looked angrily at Valerio, but he did not insult him according to his normal custom.

Petro had completely forgotten the monk's origins and continued to question Toribio. Then he briefly told the boy of their preparations for defence and urged him to take heart. They would all be leaving the day after, which would just give them time to prepare the men and send messengers to San Martín and Amaya.

"No, uncle, I would prefer not to go to San Martín immediately!", interrupted Toribio.

His father looked at him in surprise. "Now what strange ideas have got into you? Haven't you come to your senses after this escapade?", he asked in his usual surly tone, as Fafila came back into the room.

So Toribio explained his idea of taking an escort and going to the convent of Santa Maria de Monsacri. "Why? To waste time with the nuns?", asked Hernando.

But when Fafila supported the proposal, Duke Petro and his brother-in-law looked at each other with some hesitation.

"I don't much like the idea. It would be better if we stayed together . . . What is this? Another idea of yours, Valerio?", the Judge asked the monk.

Valerio was innocence itself. "No, it was your son's idea, good Judge", came a joyful voice from behind them.

It was Gaudiosa, who had come in with Ermesinda and four servants. The latter were bearing a large wooden tub and buckets of hot water, brushes and soap. Evidently, Fafila had already told her about it.

"It is a marvellous idea, and I am proud that the son of my old friend loves my daughter so much that he is offering her his protection. Duke Petro, do you think ten men will be enough?"

Hernando was silenced by this whirl of words, but the Duke was quick to answer: "We shall give him the most formidable escort the Asturias can provide, and Liuva or Teudiselo into the bargain, if you so wish."

"The Asturians will do!", replied Gaudiosa. "And now, Toribio, my servants will give you a nice bath, then direct you to the *triclinium* for dinner. All of us will be there", said the noblewomen, offering her arm to Petro.

The Duke escorted her out of the room, followed by Fafila, Ermesinda and Valerio.

Hernando delayed his exit.

"One day you will explain all this!", he said, casting a black look at his son. Toribio laughed. How much he loved that unspeakable father of his!

CHAPTER XII

SANTA MARIA DE MONSACRI

The riders led by Duke Petro and Fafila swarmed along the narrow valley of the Rio Onis, the metallic clash of their armour and weapons rending the air, while the drumming of their horses' hooves rose to the very summits of the Sierra Jana and the Sierra Nedrina. Before them, the road to San Martín ran straight as far as the Panes crossroads. Here they would come to the Rio Deva and follow it upstream as far as the convent.

Petro was garbed in the old style: long coat of mail, white tunic and wolf's skin, scale-armour helmet with circular visor and cheek protectors but no nose guard. The other Visigoths wore red cloaks and the regular pointed helmets with golden cheek and nose protectors. They all carried heavy broadswords fastened to their belts and long pikes slung on their backs; only Petro had an additional short pike.

The Asturians wore light-blue tunics under coats of small-ring mail, but only a few wore cloaks, most of them being protected from the cold by thick bearskins. They were led by Bartuelo, who rode behind the Visigoth rearguard, armed with a broadsword, a round shield painted with the bear emblem, a javelin lashed to his back, axe and dagger fastened to his belt. Atop his pudding-basin helmet, strengthened with riveted steel strips, were three sparse plumes of horsehair. The wind and the speed of their progress had conspired to wrap his short brown cloak around his neck like an enormous scarf. His hempen breeches were swaddled in sheepskin up to the thighs.

Fafila was dressed in the standard Visigoth uniform, including an enormous broadsword with gilded hilt, but in addition he wore a wolf skin as a kind of stole. He rode just behind Petro, parallel with Toribio and Hernando. They were followed by Valerio, who was riding Witisclo, not with the greatest of ease.

The last of the leading group was Froliuba, muffled up in lynx pelt. Her mount was a white filly, her only weapon the inseparable longbow, slung between her shoulder blades.

The eight hundred warriors rode ever deeper into the Asturian mountains for several hours, before finally emerging, still fresh and full of fight, at the Panes crossroads. It was around the fourth hour of the morning. It now started to rain and the cold began to bite under their soaking coats of mail, but still they pressed on. They reached the village, a few shacks raised on pine logs, having passed like a herd of enraged rams through a crowd of excited peasants and woodcutters. They were also observed from afar by large numbers of women and children, and young people who had left their ploughs on cultivated slopes and terraces on hearing the heavy thunder of the advancing army echoing up the defiles of the western valleys.

Duke Petro signalled a halt. Immediately Liuva and Teudiselo slowed their pace, stationed themselves on either side of the clearing in front of the largest hut and ordered the rest of the soldiers to gather round. The village chief, a man of around fifty in a large straw sombrero with a toothless mouth and heavily lined face, called some women who were standing nearby and told them to hand out everything they had in their stores. A chain of boys and girls soon formed, passing baskets of flat bread, rye and spelt loaves, eggs, dried sheep and goat's meat, and skins of wine. While the warriors refreshed themselves, Toribio dismounted to exchange a few words with Bartuelo, in the shelter of a straw-roofed shed. On the rear wall were hung harrows, shovels, hoes and sickles: clearly the miserable weather had persuaded their owners to stay home.

"A curse on this mud for slowing our horses!", exclaimed the Asturian, spitting on the ground as he gave instructions to his officers.

"Don't worry, Bartuelo. It'll take more than this to stop us!", broke in the youngster from Valle.

"Oh, it's you, is it? The Cantabrian who escaped from the Mauritanians!", Bartuelo greeted him.

The pair introduced themselves and exchanged the jars of wine that two young village girls had just handed them. Bartuelo was a handsome fellow: blue eyes gazing out from under thick eyebrows, a squarish face, clearly delineated and muscular like the rest of his body. He asked no questions about what had happened at Xixon. Like many Asturian men, he was not nosy, more concerned to know the real value of his companions.

"But isn't it somewhat unwise to fight without armour?", he asked.

Toribio replied that he had never needed it and that, with the protection of God and his lion medallion, he felt he would come through unharmed.

Bartuelo was perplexed but did not argue. Toribio had become something of a legend among the Asturians, specially after his feat of bowmanship. Bartuelo said he had already received the order to give him an escort of ten Asturians to accompany him to the convent where Pelayo's sister was abbess.

"Don't take offence if the men I give you are not the most highly trained, but I am sure that ten under the command of Fruela will be more than enough to look after a few nuns", he said, pointing to a soldier perched on a nearby plough.

The boy was thin as a rake, with short black hair, large brown eyes, and the beginnings of a beard on his rather triangular face, which was anaemic and showed signs of acne.

Fruela hopped off the plough, protesting: "What? What's all this? I've never commanded so much as a platoon! What am I to do? I'm only here because my father Froila dragged me out of bed this morning! I'm not likely to get killed, am I?"

Bartuelo and the other officers burst out laughing. "You're a real booby, Fruela! A good thing you've got that carpenter for a father, a good fellow. Otherwise you'd still be clinging to your mother's skirts!"

The other Asturians began to make fun of him. Fruela went bright red.

"He's got to learn to behave like a real Asturian!", said Bartuelo, turning to Toribio. "Take him with you. The others are reasonably capable, at least with a javelin and a mace . . . This fellow needs to learn, but he'll grow in stature with you!"

Toribio looked at the pathetic weakling and felt compassion. He might have been a little older than Fafila, but it was immediately clear he was ill at ease in his leather body armour. Standing in the mud and rain, he looked like a child who had been made to stand in the corner for stealing honey from the neighbours' cupboard. Toribio looked him up and down again and suddenly felt the cross warm against his chest. He sensed there was something genuine about this unpromising individual. "So be it, then! Welcome to my service, bold Fruela! You shall be my decurion and shall command the ten men your leader assigns to us!".

Bartuelo was surprised. He thought Toribio had understood he was joking. The others were silent. But Toribio set his face like flint: "Truly, I tell you, Asturian fellow-soldiers, that I will make of this young man a warrior you will one day look up to!"

Fruela timidly raised his eyes to look at this man in the green jerkin with the silver headband holding his blond hair, and a wide smile broke across his face. The others looked at one another but had no time to object. Liuva had come into their shelter to give Bartuelo the order to get his men on their way.

After Panes, the horsemen reached the Rio Deva, crossed the bridge that Toribio, Hernando and Valerio had negotiated more than a week before, crossed another bridge, then climbed the winding road southward, between the mountains of the Sierra Corta and the Sierra de Cuerres, keeping to the right bank of the river. The rain did not let up, but no one was discouraged. Duke Petro, upright in the saddle, rode silent and alone at the apex of that enormous mass of iron and leather. His army moved like a panting monster through woods of fir, ash and larch and between steep walls of pinkish rock, perforated here and there by caves—black, frightening and mysterious—likes the eyes of giants who had been dead for thousands of years.

Now and again, Toribio glanced down to his left, where the foaming waters of the Deva ran with a swelling roar, as the track they were following became increasingly narrow and muddy. He had not forgotten the hidden dangers of those waters and began to pray inwardly to the Virgin Mary. Immediately behind him, Valerio and Hernando were also tense and anxious. Suddenly Fafila, who was riding a few yards in front of Petro, sensed something moving furtively on the edge of his field of vision. He turned his head to left and right, then looked up at the pink-hued mountain tops. Nothing. All was still, except for the sound of the rain, combining with that of the foaming waters of the river. He took up the reins, which he had allowed to slacken, but again he had an impression of something strange. Yes, there it was: an enormous brown shape had moved from one cave to another, just below the peaks on the other side of the river.

Fafila seized his bow and was about to nock an arrow, when Bartuelo reached over to stop him.

"No, don't even think of it, young Fafila! They would destroy us in a flash!", murmured the Asturian captain, inviting him to keep his voice down.

"Who are they?", whispered the Visigoth.

"They are the souls of the giants of Ezla, formerly the servants of the goddess Astyr, until she found out they had fallen for the Xanas of the

Deva. She punished them by turning them to stone among these rocks and allowed only their spirits to move along the rock face to keep one another company. From a distance, they can do nothing, but if you get too close they can crush you by hurling enormous boulders", explained Bartuelo.

"Get away with you, Bartuelo! Those are pagan beliefs, aren't they?", replied Fafila with a smile.

Bartuelo looked at him with a serious expression. "You should know that I, too, am a Christian, as is my father Cerilo, who received the faith from my grandmother Millana, but no Asturian would ever dare defy the legends of his native land. It is said that the goddess Astyr, whom the Romans called Aurora, lived here and was the mother and mistress of all these creatures, and that the Asturias takes their name from her. I am not a pagan and have no desire to become involved in such mysteries, but I too saw those shadowy figures and think it best we pray to the Virgin and get out of this mud as quick as we can!"

So saying, Bartuelo left Fafila and spurred his horse to catch up with Petro. The pair exchanged a few words. Petro surveyed the peaks overhanging both sides of the valley, glanced at the rest of the cohort, then signalled to Liuva and Teudiselo to approach.

"Give the order to pick up speed!", he said. "But let no one call out or take their eyes off the road! At the head of this valley we shall come to the turning for the abbey of Santa Maria!"

The two lieutenants carried out his command and soon the great iron serpent was emerging from the enchanted valley.

It was around the seventh hour when the valley began to open out and give way to an uneven plateau, dotted here and there with thickets of sweet chestnut, strawberry-tree and wild cherry. The sun had broken through and an almost turquoise sky opened up over the pastel green pastures. There was not a church or hut in view, only the odd flock of mountain sheep, guarded by two or three dogs. Not even a shepherd boy. Duke Petro ordered his men to stop near a row of four cypresses. It was strange to find such trees at that altitude. While the riders dismounted to consume provisions from their saddlebags, Toribio noted that the cypresses marked the beginning of a track following the slope downhill. The hillside was bare at first, then increasingly covered in mountain ash, a shrub whose reddish buds were just breaking. The scrub gave way to a dense thicket of tamarisks and the distant silhouettes of isolated holly trees. Beyond

could be made out the dark outlines of the Monsacri, at the foot of which, unbeknown to Toribio, stood the abbey of Santa Maria.

As he was admiring this delightful view, a voice spoke up behind him: "What have we got to do at the abbey, Toribio?"

Toribio turned and saw his protégé with the triangular face standing beside his horse.

"Nothing, Fruela!", he smiled.

The boy was bemused.

"Nothing, apart from looking after a few nuns . . .", he said, ". . . and maybe a princess".

Fruela smiled to keep him happy, but clearly he didn't have a clue. Toribio, on the other hand, knew exactly whom he was thinking about, and his gaze continued to linger on the landscape beyond the thicket of tamarisks.

Petro and Hernando held a long discussion, then called Toribio. His uncle explained that they would be leaving him at that point. "That is the way to the abbey, Toribio! Right in front of you", said Petro in his usual baritone.

Hernando urged his boy to be careful and, as always, to trust nobody. Then he reviewed all the Asturians that Bartuelo had allocated to him. They were, on the whole, well-built lads, short in stature, but sturdy enough, and armed to the teeth. Then his eyes fell on Fruela.

"And where have they dragged this one up from? He doesn't even know how to carry a mace!", bawled the Judge in irritation, noting that Fruela had attached the weapon to his belt with the handle upside down. "You silly idiot, boy. Can't you see you're going to lose your weapons before you even get there?".

Fruela lowered his eyes, red with shame and terrorised by the reproaches of this important personage.

"Don't address my decurion in that way, father! Or he'll die of fright before he even sees an Arab in the flesh!".

Hernando faced up to his son with his usual tough expression. "Another of your ideas, I suppose? I'd better keep quiet, since you are so keen on wasting time acting as sentry to a few nuns. But watch you don't spend too much time on that girl; you would do better devoting it to training these bumpkins!", he advised.

Toribio simply nodded by way of reply.

Meanwhile, Valerio had joined them. "I have a sense of foreboding, my friend", he interjected. "I dreamed you were a prisoner of the Saracens, they were torturing you to find out the strength of our forces and their positions. There was also a fat man, with white hair and a face like the muzzle of a wild boar. He was dressed like a Jew and wanted to know about the Ruby Cross. Be on your guard, dear boy, the devil has allies everywhere!"

Toribio listen to him attentively, but did not seem frightened by his warnings.

"Whatever happens to me, don't stop praying to the Virgin and St. Jacobus. This is why it is better for now that I watch over those who are most vulnerable; when we are at San Martín de Turieno, all together, you will feel more relaxed."

The monk made no reply. Toribio seemed to know what he was about. More than that, he seemed to be guided by something more powerful than themselves. The pair stood looking at each other. They had been travelling companions for the last ten days and fellow believers for almost seven years. Maybe this was the last time they would ever be together in this life. But Valerio chose to be optimistic. "I will pray for you, but watch out for temptations!", he said finally.

Toribio laid a hand on his shoulder and said goodbye: "We'll meet again in San Martín!"

Valerio helped him to stow the saddlebags and gave him a leg-up as he mounted Asfredo. Toribio saluted his father and uncle, waved to Fafila and Froliuba, who were watching from the other side of the road, bid a final farewell to Valerio, then went over to Fruela, who was waiting with the others beside the row of cypresses.

The group moved off, down the gentle slope. They traversed the thicket of tamarisks in no time and were soon in a large meadow dotted with holly trees. They followed the road in the direction of the dark mountains in the east and, towards vespers, arrived at a bridge over a stream. On the other side, Toribio noticed the roof of a little church, visible beyond some beech trees, whose twisted roots were exposed on the edge of the path.

"Are we on the right track? Is that the abbey?", he asked Fruela.

"No, that is the church of the Angels of Love. It has been abandoned since the abbey was built. Let's go on, *domne* Toribio, this is the right way!"

Fruela was familiar with the area. His mother, Liutela, had brought him there a couple of times. He suddenly remembered how difficult he had found it to learn the Creed, but with his mother's help he had finally succeeded. Now she was not around, and neither were his sisters, Xuana and Xepa, whom he had left at home that morning, busily engaged in cleaning the oven and the cowshed. He was all alone, under the orders of a foreigner who seemed kind but wanted him at his side to fight the Saracens. Fruela was afraid. He would have liked to wake up and find it had all been a bad dream. But no. It was all true. He had to become a fighting man. So his father had told him, and if he ran away everybody, the whole village, would despise him. And, of course, when he died, he would go to hell. It didn't bear thinking about.

The path ended in a circular clearing. Before them rose a large stone building of great beauty. The façade was trapezoid in shape, divided into three bays by tall pilasters. In the middle was a gothic-arched doorway set back behind a series of concentric arches supported by marble capitals carved with floral decoration. Above the doorway was a small three-arched blind window, the central section of which was occupied by a statue of the Virgin and Child, flanked on either side by figures of St. Johannes and St. Matthaeus. Higher still, at the centre of the tympanum-shaped apex, was a round-arched opening, in which was suspended a small bell, one of those strange instruments for summoning the faithful that had become an increasingly common addition to church facades and towers in recent years. The lateral bays were given stability by wings of light-coloured laterite alternating with long windows, like the teeth of a comb. The roof was covered in smooth carmine-red shingles. Along the building, about fifteen feet off the ground, ran a frieze of Celtic rosettes alternating with figures of birds, dogs, lambs and fish. The group were enraptured by the sight of such imaginative workmanship.

And this was only the front elevation, that of the church itself. The convent stretched away behind, built to a quadrangular plan with a tower at each corner and ranges of buildings in between, housing the scriptorium, kitchens and refectory, and, on the first floor, the nuns' cells. There were a hundred or so nuns, a large number for an abbey in remote mountainous country so far from Rome.

The lads skirted round the church and stopped in front of what they took to be the convent entrance. They dismounted and Toribio knocked at the small door, receiving no immediate response. After a long wait,

the door opened and a nun emerged, dressed in black with a purple shawl round her neck.

"Who are you, brothers?", asked the old lady.

"I am Toribio Del Valle and this is my escort. We are here on the orders of Duke Pelayo and of my uncle, Duke Petro of Amaya. The Saracens are close at hand and I have volunteered to protect you. I would like to meet your abbess, Verosinda", replied the young Cantabrian.

The nun made no reply. She closed the door and there was another long wait. Then the door opened a second time. Standing there on the threshold, blinking in the rays of the sun, was a woman of about thirty, wearing a long white gown and a turquoise cloak. She was tall and slender, her straight black hair falling to her shoulders. On her handsome, prominent bosom was displayed a necklace of pearls with a sapphire pendant in the form of an eagle. There was something sensuous about her dark eyes. This was Verosinda, sister of the Visigoth leader. Toribio introduced himself and his men. He spoke of Pelayo, Gaudiosa, Agasinda and the reason for their mission.

Verosinda's eyes opened wide with delight: "So you are Goswinta's son?"

Toribio was surprised by the question, as Verosinda quickly noted.

"I knew her at the convent of Santa Maria de Cosgaya. She was an excellent and most beautiful woman. She knitted to perfection and embroidered plush and satin gowns with flowers and animals, the like of which you have never seen. She was a noble soul, devout and sweet as honey".

Then a bitter memory: "When Gaudiosa told me your uncle had come to take her to Amaya, I cried for three days. I hoped to see her again, but then I had to return to Toledo with my brother, where it seemed I was to marry a nobleman from the court of King Ergica. That was before Prince Wittiza killed our father. From that time on, we lived as refugees . . .", she said, turning up memories that had lain buried for twenty years.

Toribio looked at her sadly. But he was pleased to find, as it were, a piece of his mother. The cross was now glowing warm on his chest: the person before him was one of the blessed.

"Your nephew will be married on Sunday at San Martín. It is my task to protect you from danger over the next few days. I hope ten men will be enough!", explained the young man from Valle de Autrigonia.

Verosinda looked at his youthful escort, armed to the teeth but with the faces of children. Fruela introduced himself, forgetting his etiquette, since he should have waited to be introduced by Toribio. Verosinda gazed at him with a maternal expression.

"So young, and already they are sending you to face mortal dangers!", she said.

Fruela was clearly embarrassed, but replied: "I am the decurion of this squad of soldiers, and Toribio is my commander!"

The other Asturians grumbled among themselves. Verosinda laughed and looked at Toribio, himself unable to conceal his scepticism.

"Obviously, my brother does not think we need a spatharius of his crack troops down here!", she concluded.

Toribio smiled. "It was my idea. I asked for your and Agasinda's sakes . . . By the way . . . is she here with you?"

"Certainly she is, and she has already told me about you!", replied the handsome abbess, adding: "Follow me!"

The dozen or so nuns gathered in the entrance hall could not resist whispering comments on these lads from the outside world. One of them, who could not have been more than twelve, ran to inform the others, slipping through a door which gave onto a large courtyard, unable to hold back her shouts of enthusiasm. Verosinda looked at Toribio. "It's not every day we see men up here, let alone handsome young lads!", she said.

Fruela and the Asturians thrust their chests out and passed between the rows of nuns like bantam cocks on show at a fair. Some of them made bawdy comments, but Fruela gave them a black look to make them behave appropriately.

The twelve warriors strode through the portico surrounding the courtyard, making for the refectory. Verosinda explained to Toribio the layout of the convent and the use to which the rooms on the ground floor were put. The scriptorium, half way along this arm of the building, was the pride of the abbey. She had insisted on having it, a real innovation at a time when monks had a monopoly on libraries and the copying of ancient texts.

"You see, Toribio, over a hundred years ago, Bishop Leandro of Seville wrote a rule for his sister Fiorentina, who was abbess of a convent like me. Then his brother Isidoro wrote a more extensive rule for all religious houses, which also included times for reading in the scriptorium. I have

done only what those holy men intended", said the aristocratic abbess, a spark of pride flashing in her lovely eyes.

Toribio was filled with admiration, but her words had less impact on his companions, who were all strictly illiterate. The Asturians followed Toribio and Verosinda in single file, saying nothing, as if they were performing a boring task, and marched across the middle of the courtyard. The echo of their heavy footfall attracted the attention of the nuns engaged in their daily occupations. Other young women, dressed in white with blue aprons, appeared at the doors of the kitchen and sewing room. Some young girls leaned out over the huge sill supporting the window arches of the scriptorium. Distracted by the sudden commotion, they had left their breviaries on the high wooden pews. "Look at the one in the middle with the green crest! That's the sort of man I'd like!", said one of them, a dreamy look in her eyes. Others commented on the appearance of the various young men, but no one wasted too many words on Fruela. "Don't tell me that one is their officer. He couldn't sit a horse even if he were fixed there by his willy", stated a young lass with curly blond hair tied back with silk ribbons. Her companions sniggered at the sight of poor Fruela, who wrongly thought they were looking at him admiringly and imagined undressing them and caressing their virginal bodies. He could feel an erection coming on at the sight of those nice clean, well-dressed girls, so different from the smelly, gap-teethed faces of his sisters and their friends.

On reaching the other side of the courtyard, they passed through a horseshoe-shaped doorway into an enormous hall, with rows of tables and blazing braziers. Verosinda placed them at the table nearest the eastern wall, which was still lit by the sun's rays shining through the two and three-arched clearstory windows. The Asturians took their seats. Verosinda told two nuns what dishes they should serve to their guests, then began to pray. It was almost the hour of compline and all the nuns began to file into the room. One by one, they paused in front of a sister with a little whip, whose job was to check that their hands were clean with no dirt under the nails. Toribio eventually identified a familiar face, with shining chestnut eyes like those of a lynx. Agasinda, at last. The girl sought his face among the coarse, dirty faces of the guests and, finding it, gave him a smile. Toribio's heart leaped. Verosinda noticed but made no comment.

The abbess invited the guests to sit at her table, on the other side of the refectory, and all the nuns were silent, waiting for grace to be said.

Verosinda then rose, uttered a prayer of thanks and nodded to the nuns standing beside the tables. They were bearing enormous oval trays on which were set out loaves of bread, bowls of soup, punnets of strawberries and jars of olives. While they served the food, other nuns poured water into the glasses on the tables. Toribio ate in silence, as did his companions, slightly disconcerted by the furtive glances of so large a company of women. Agasinda pretended to ignore him, so as not to arouse the suspicions of her aunt, and Toribio was grateful for her reserve.

However, while searching for her out of the corner of his eye, he noticed an aged nun, who must have been more than seventy, munching olives and acorns at the corner of a neighbouring table. Verosinda noticed his interest.

"That is Liuvigoto", she explained. "The widow of old King Erwig, the Greek!"

Toribio immediately remembered the story of the plot against King Ergica.

"The rebellion of Sunifred and Bishop Sisbertus?", he asked ingenuously.

Verosinda's expression darkened. "Ssssh!", she stopped him. "Those names are not fit to be so much as uttered! Rather, say a prayer for that poor soul. I have never seen her laugh, not once".

Thus Toribio came to know the face of that ancient queen, who had once ruled the Visigoth kingdom. Her face was lined and wrinkled, while her thin grey hair was half covered by a black plush hood, threadbare with age. She wore a long purple tunic and a grey gown, crumpled and frayed at the sleeves. She was thin as a rake and could barely introduce the olives into her foul, toothless mouth. Her eyes, lost in loose folds of skin, were dull and lifeless. Not even the last rays of the setting sun coming in through the windows deigned to touch her. He would not have wished such an end on anyone, even a woman universally detested.

CHAPTER XIII

LOVE IN THE RUINED CHAPEL

Toribio awoke at dead of night. It was cold and the room was damp. The linen sheets and woollen blanket he had been given did not fully cover him. May was still a winter month in these mountains, so he decided to get dressed and go for a stroll. Maybe sleep would come to him again later.

He walked the long corridor between the nuns' cells and went downstairs. Now he was under the portico of the inner courtyard, at the centre of which the moonlight picked out a pot-bellied well. He went on in silence, the image of Agasinda occupying his mind, the cross icy on his chest. Then, passing through a hallway decorated with scenes from the Book of Revelation, he heard someone singing an old song in Gothic. The sound was coming from the scriptorium. Approaching the threshold, he glimpsed a statue of the Virgin Mary beside the largest desk and, beneath it, the figure of an ancient woman, bowed down with her hands joined in prayer.

"Come forward, do not be afraid, young Cantabrian!", said Liuvigoto in his own language. Toribio felt intimidated by her invitation.

"I've heard about you. The blood of our people runs in your veins, God bless you! Never fear, come and sit beside me, on this bench!", she urged him.

Toribio did as he was told. There was an oil lamp at the foot of the statue and the light caught the features of the nun from below. Her face now seemed even older than it had appeared to him the previous evening in the refectory—as if all the four-hundred-year tribulations of the Visigoth people were etched on that worn countenance.

The woman waited for him to sit down, then began: "Of course, you know my story. The likes of us, our sins are written on our faces . . . but let me tell you some important things concerning your mission".

Toribio was taken aback; what did she know about it?

"Watch out for that bishop, that Astasio you left at Xixon with the Berbers. They did not kill him, I can assure you. He is not a bishop, but a messenger from hell!", said Liuvigoto.

Toribio was even more frightened.

"He is like that Sisbertus, the one with whom Sunifred and I allied ourselves in our lust for power, God forgive us! They are demons who seek to destroy the peace of this world! Watch out for them, for you are the chosen one. They will soon know. They will pursue you and your race for at least fifty generations, until the final event, that of the Diamond Cross!"

Toribio was about to ask her to explain, but she silenced him with a gesture.

"No, don't ask me any questions! I dreamed of St. Jacobus. He told me to warn you. In exchange, he told me that my tribulations will soon end, and I shall at last be forgiven for what I did. That is why I came here to chant my gratitude!"

Having said this, Liuvigoto drew near to Toribio, stroked his hair, muttered an old Gothic blessing, then left him. Toribio was deeply disturbed. But now the cross was warm again. Maybe a good sign. He felt sleep coming upon him and hurried back to his cell, where he fell exhausted on the bed, not feeling the least bit cold.

It was around nine o'clock when Toribio was summoned to Verosinda's office. He had spent the early hours training the Asturians to handle sword and shield on the well-tended lawn on the north side of the abbey. Leaving Fruela in charge, he made his way back to the convent, following a young nun wearing a yellow tunic and brown sleeveless gown. She was one of the girls from the basket-making workshop and carried two Moses baskets under her arms. They entered a room lit only by a three-arched window, on the ledge of which stood pots of flowers. In the middle of the room was a massive desk of dark wood, maybe walnut, covered in parchments and papers still wet with ink. The abbess was reading them attentively.

Against the walls stood enormous cupboards and bookshelves stuffed with dusty notebooks, marked with codex numbers in Roman characters, maybe the dates of the annual abbey records. But there were also volumes going back to the Third Council of Toledo. They were too old to have been there from the time they were written: the convent was little more than forty years old.

"I had those brought over from San Martín. Some contain the rules of bishops Leandro and Isidoro. One day we shall look at them together", said Verosinda, noting the young man's interest in old books.

Toribio did not have time to express his thanks.

The abbess was already busy examining the young nun's baskets.

"No, you must do better than this! The handles need to be attached with a double knot; these will not last a week! And what about the bottom? As I told sister Teodogunda, I want a sheep's wool cushion, not bare wickerwork."

The girl burst into tears for shame. Verosinda pulled out a silk handkerchief and wiped her cheeks.

"You must not be afraid of correction. It keeps us on the straight path. We all need it. No one is perfect!"

The girl nodded her assent, gathered up the defective baskets and made her exit.

Toribio was still examining the writing on the spines of the notebooks, when, point blank, Verosinda posed an unwelcome question: "Do you really love my niece so much?".

Toribio turned bright red.

"I have only known her for a day, at your sister-in-law's palace . . . she is skilled on the harp and she taught me to play chess . . .", he stammered as he tried to overcome his embarrassment.

"I am well aware of my niece's likes and dislikes, and she spoke very highly of you! She says you are wise and—I have to admit it now I have met you—very handsome!", said the abbess thoughtfully. "But you have never been with a woman before, have you?"

Toribio was not able to sustain her searching gaze. Yet he was loath to admit his total lack of experience. "Women know these things intuitively, but don't worry . . . the Lord has his appointed hour for everything!", she reassured him.

Toribio went even redder. He would have preferred to be with his men on the abbey lawn. From up here he could still hear the squeaky orders of young Fruela. The boy was trying to shout like a Roman decurion, but the others were laughing him to scorn. Strange, thought Toribio: for us to be considered men we have to be good at instilling fear; but no one has ever taught us how to speak to a women. Verosinda seemed to read his mind. But at this point they were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Aunt, what is this? An interrogation?"

The young man turned to see her again, still as beautiful, now clothed in a pink gown, its edges sewn with gems of alabaster, lapis lazuli and cornelian. On her chest hung the amulet with the agate given her by her father. Her hair was loose on her shoulders, her cheeks full but soft, as if she had just got out of bed after a night's love-making. Toribio felt his legs flex under him.

"Greetings, dear friend from Valle de Autrigonia. I have thought about you and prayed for you a lot. I knew you had left for Xixon shortly before my mother sent me up here. Tell me what happened."

Toribio remembered that Agasinda had already left when he returned from his mission and could not know anything about it.

"It would take me a couple of days to tell you everything!", he said, proud to be recognised as an ambassador back from a dangerous journey, and speaking to her in the familiar form, just as she had addressed him.

"You will have plenty of time later", interrupted the abbess. "Now listen: the day is still young and there is much to be done. Sister Matilde, the one who opened the door to you yesterday afternoon, is waiting in the kitchen to give you your lunch basket. Then you, Toribio, will escort my niece, the cook Ardogunda and the other kitchen girls to look for mushrooms, acorns, blackberries and aniseed flowers for the flat bread I intend to prepare for my nephew's wedding. Ah! You can also try and find some camomile, mint and cumin. Sister Julia de Cartagena has been having trouble with her digestion these last three days."

"Shall I escort them on my own?", asked Toribio.

"It is better your men stay here . . . Anyway, for a few poor nuns, even your Fruela will do!", replied the abbess with a laugh.

It was obvious. Agasinda's aunt wanted them to spend some time together.

"Be back for the evening Angelus. At this time of year it is light until compline . . . You won't get lost, eh?". The two of them smiled their agreement. Here at last was the permission they had been waiting for.

Having stopped by at the kitchens to get the provisions from old Matilde, the young people set out, keeping a little distance behind Ardogunda, a plumpish lass of around twenty-five, and the other four assistants, all young teenagers and painfully thin. The surrounding countryside was delightful: meadows of fresh grass transparent as aquamarine, buttercups, dandelion clocks and poppies, reeds the colour of bronze, and patches of juniper and

tamarisk. Singing Lauds, they passed through thickets of alder-buckthorn, ash and hawthorn, and finally reached a hillside covered in oak woodland. Here they spread out and began looking for mushrooms.

Rachigunda, one of the teenagers, suddenly shouted for joy. Before her stretched a carpet of small fungi, their red caps dotted with white.

"No, leave them, they are flybane! They are poisonous and cause terrible hallucinations!", cried Ardogunda.

The girl drew back her hand as if she had been in contact with the devil, and wiped it on the edge of her tunic. Not long after, it was Eliotera's turn to express her delight. This time, the fungi were of the right sort and Ardogunda congratulated her. Four nice plump boletus mushrooms.

"With these and some barley flour, we'll be able to make at least ten *focacce*!", declared the cook. Gradually their baskets filled with every sort of choice fruit, herb and fungus. They then stopped for lunch and ate the provisions Matilde had prepared for them: rolls, dry biscuits, pancakes, honey, water and, for Toribio, a small jar of wine.

"I'm sure we shall eat far better on Sunday", said Agasinda, seated on the knotted roots of a huge oak.

"I can't wait to be your brother's witness," replied Toribio, who preferred to sit cross-legged on the grass as he gnawed at his share of the biscuits.

Ardogunda and the other sisters had withdrawn to pray near an obelisk-shaped rock on the edge of the wood, maybe the pillar of an old pagan temple. Agasinda watched Toribio fill out his cheeks, like a child trying to stuff everything into his mouth in one go. She was tempted to laugh, seeing him in this state, the warrior she had come to admire as an example of the virility she longed for.

"Let's get away for a while!", said the Visigoth maiden suddenly.

"What? On our own? But shouldn't we keep together?", said her young admirer, not really understanding. "Don't worry about them. They've only just started their prayers. Come with me. I know a wonderful place, just below the road you came by yesterday. Follow me, we won't be long!", she urged.

Toribio followed her, drawn by her enthusiasm but reluctant to abandon the others.

Agasinda led him along a path on the edge of a beech wood. Beyond, the track was of compacted stone, marked at intervals by piles of cut logs. Families of squirrels scuttled up and down the ancient tree trunks, while

doves cooed in the bushes, and they saw a pair of red deer lock horns in the endless struggle for territory.

"This place isn't far, is it?", asked Toribio at a certain point, parting the thick undergrowth with his sword.

"No, we're almost there! Look, down there, the Church of the Angels of Love!", she said, almost skipping with delight.

Toribio recognised the outline of the little old church, which he had glimpsed the day before with his Asturian escort. They approached slowly. The silence was unreal. No birdsong, not even the bleat of a sheep. Only the rustle of parting leaves greeted the pair as they moved towards the porch projecting from one side of the building. The church was built of stone solidly cemented by layers of mortar, with a roof of still well-aligned shingles, despite the invasive vegetation. It must be two hundred years old, thought Toribio, maybe built before the arrival of the Visigoths, when there were just a few Benedictine monks up here, surrounded by pagans.

They passed through the shadowy porch, invaded by weeds, the floor covered in dry leaves, and entered the church by a rickety door. They could hardly see where to put their feet. Toribio could just make out a baptismal font and the marble altar, shrouded in dusty cobwebs.

"Come with me. When I visit this place, I like to climb the tower to enjoy the view", murmured Agasinda. Toribio followed, risking the cracked and fragile rungs set into the walls of the tower, which led to the bell loft. This chamber was lit by small clover-shaped openings. In the middle of the planks forming the floor was a straw pallet. There was an ancient, musty smell, the dust of past ages.

Through the window openings they could see the majestic chain of the Monsacri and the woods of fir and larch covering their slopes. The sun was low and its beams shone in, projecting cross shapes on the walls and ceiling. Then Toribio felt Agasinda's hand searching for his and noticed that, in this light, her face had changed. Her features were now those of a grown woman, her gaze intense and penetrating, but full of joy. She brought her lips to bear on his and gently kissed him. Toribio felt a sudden fire flare up in his chest and run down to his lower abdomen. He responded fiercely, now feeling her tongue against his own, a sensation unknown to him, but wonderful. They lowered themselves onto the straw and tore off their clothes with the fury of two animals on heat. There, with the same urgency, they consummated their passion, sacrificing their virginity

to each other. Then they fell back exhausted, resting one against the other, and fell asleep.

When Toribio awoke, he could not have desired a more welcome sight: Agasinda's naked body nestling against his left side, her head on his chest. He could feel her heartbeats keeping pace with his own. What ecstasy! But then . . . a horrible thought dawned on him! Something was missing. The cross! He searched for it desperately, but it was nowhere to be found, not even among the clothes strewn on the planking around them.

"What are you looking for?", asked the girl, emerging from sleep, still lapped in the pleasure of her fulfilment.

Toribio did not reply. Agasinda saw that his expression had changed and was frightened, but there was no time for explanations, because they suddenly heard the sound of the abbey bells, followed by the voice of Fruela, who had come in search of them:

"The Saracens, the Saracens! They're killing everybody!"

Toribio froze. He had betrayed the cross. He had done what he ought not to have done. And the Lord had punished them. Hurriedly they got dressed. Agasinda was sobbing.

Outside, Fruela met them, terror written on his face:

"I've been looking for you everywhere. It's a good thing I know of this place. Quick, let's get out of here!"

"No, we must get back to the abbey straight away. We must do all we can!", urged Toribio.

Fruela looked at him, terrified. "Don't count on me!", he said and made off as fast as his legs would carry him, abandoning sword and helmet.

Toribio and Agasinda ran towards the monastery, arriving while it was still light. The door had been torn off its hinges.

They found the bodies of a number of nuns in the hallway, their throats slit, and others along the portico. Toribio recognised the features of the young nun with the wicker Moses baskets who had fetched him that morning. Her clothes were torn and she lay there, half naked, with a wide cut across her abdomen. Then they heard shouting. Going on, they saw, around the well in the centre of the courtyard, ten or so warriors with black tunics and half-moon helmets, brandishing the heads of the Asturian soldiers and throwing them to one another, as if they were bolts of material.

Though horrified, Toribio had no time to react, his mental processes interrupted by the cries of Verosinda, coming from her office. Her

assailants had managed to break down the door, behind which she and some other nuns had piled heavy pieces of furniture. More shouts were heard, immediately cut short by heavy thuds. Then Toribio saw Verosinda leaning out of the window. Behind her stood a giant of a man, dressed all in black, who threatened her with a long curved sword. Verosinda tried to defend herself with her bare hands. The Arab dropped his scimitar, grabbed her by the neck and repeatedly pulled her towards him, but she managed to break free and gave him a slap on the face. Then, while the man was still off balance, Verosinda jumped up on the window sill, looked heavenward, crossed her hands on her chest and leapt into the void.

Agasinda cried out and ran to her aid, but it was too late. Her aunt's eyes were wide open and peaceful, but with a light not of this world. In a fury, Toribio ran towards the Arabs around the well and engaged in frenetic combat, supported a moment later by Agasinda, who was wielding Fruela's abandoned sword. But it was an unequal struggle. Though Toribio managed to wound three of them, he was finally struck on the head and lost consciousness.

The Arabs soon disarmed Agasinda, though she had succeeded in slashing one of them on the jaw, and felled her with a blow to the neck.

"Al Qama!", yelled one of the men "Could these be the young people you are looking for?"

The warrior at the window scrutinised Toribio's clothes. "The cross!", he shouted with a loud oath. "Look for it!"

The Arab rummaged under Toribio's shirt. "There's nothing here!", he shouted. The other swore again. "Never mind! Let's take them with us. They'll answer to our leaders", he finished, before disappearing from the window.

The ten black riders mounted the horses they had left on the lawn outside, heaving up the senseless bodies of Toribio and Agasinda. Then they galloped off towards the Monsacri. The sun had now set. An icy wind began to blow over the abbey, as flocks of crows descended to feast on the piles of mutilated bodies.

CHAPTER XIV

DEVILRY IN THE MONSACRI

Toribio came to slowly, suffering from a violent pain in his forehead, aware of the blood that had congealed on his face. He saw barren ground rushing past under the horse's hooves. He had been bound and tied like a saddlebag. He raised his head and turned to see whose mount he was on, but could see only the folds of a wide black cloak, the edges of which occasionally brushed against his face. He despaired at his impotence. Only then did he become aware of other horses behind him, ridden by men in black with crescent-moon helmets, stony faces and pitiless eyes. They were riding lustrous grey chargers, also caparisoned in black, with bloodshot eyes and nostrils pumping like bellows. A cold wind was whistling around them. There were snow-capped peaks to left and right; they were above the tree line. Nothing to be seen but rocks and frost-covered shrubs. It must be early morning.

Where were they going? And what about Agasinda? Was she still alive? Maybe bound to a horse outside his field of vision? What had happened? How had their enemies known they were up here?

Then Toribio remembered Liuvigoto's words and put two and two together. That Bishop Astasio knew that Pelayo's sister and daughter were at the convent. It was he who had passed on the information. What other explanation was there? But why would a bishop do such a thing? He was a strange man indeed. Instead of love and peace, he instilled only doubts. Like a tempter; definitely not a holy man. And he was oily, with that disproportionately large face, as if concealing a diabolic animal, ready to spring out at the opportune moment and seize its prey. "*They are everywhere! Watch out for them!*", the old Visigoth queen had told him. Now he understood. They had found him. They wanted the Ruby Cross. It was all over. He tried to pray to the Virgin Mary and St. Jacobus, but his heart was cold. The horse had slackened its pace and the boy was overwhelmed with tiredness.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun had gone down. The wind had dropped, sleet was falling and it was colder. The horse finally came to a

halt. Toribio pretended he was still unconscious. Squinting through barely open lids, he saw a stone-built shelter by the side of the track and, behind, the sheer walls of the dark mountains. The building seemed to be on the edge of a ravine. He noticed smoke coming from a hole in the wooden roof. Then he heard orders, short and sharp, being given in Arabic. They lifted him bodily from the horse's back and carried him inside the hut, where he was lowered onto a paillasse. Beside him he felt the warmth of another body. It was Agasinda, still unconscious. At least she was breathing. He would have liked to shake her, but was unable to move; he had been bound like a sheaf of corn. Then he saw the Arabs in silhouette, talking in low voices around the fire.

There were also three men dressed in blue, with white cloaks and turbans. Almost certainly Berbers. They seemed to be rebuking the Arabs and the name of Verosinda was frequently mentioned. They had not realised that he was watching them through half-closed eyelids. Then he heard an oily voice speaking in a different accent, and almost immediately the door closed. The shadow of a large man rose on the walls of the shelter, with hands and arms that seemed to extend and retract like the claws of a bird of prey. He was speaking their language, but with an unpleasant timbre, in a way familiar to Toribio. The shadowy figure moved around the fire, now rising to his full height, now becoming smaller and everyone seemed to be listening to him respectfully. He suddenly delivered a sharp slap to one of the black riders, then uttered unknown words in a low voice. Toribio did not understand what was being said, but as he tried to creep closer he received a blow to the neck and lost consciousness again.

When he came round, he was lying on damp soil covered in moss. He was in a large cavern, barely lit by a torch wedged between a couple of stalactites hanging from the roof. In front of him was a man dressed in white, holding a red staff and quietly observing him. His face was green and scaly, with yellow eyes set below an oily forehead.

"Where is it?", were his opening words.

"So it's you, Bishop Astasio? I thought you were a prisoner or dead at the hands of the Berbers!", replied the young man, feigning amazement.

"Where is it?", he repeated his question.

Toribio observed the devilish face and again remembered Liuvigoto's words.

"What do you want with me, servant of Satan?", he asked in scornful tones.

"You've got courage, my Cantabrian friend! What do I want? You know very well: the cross!", Oppa cut him short.

"I no longer have it, cursed demon!", replied Toribio.

Oppa was about to strike him with his staff, then thought better of it. Instead, he assumed a gentle expression and the scales disappeared from his skin.

"Listen, son, didn't you tell me you were in love with that girl, Agasinda? If you tell me where the cross is and what you have to do with it, I will free her and you can return together to your people!"

But Toribio did not give an inch.

"Hell hound! Our Lord will punish you for this! Blackmail won't work. Don't you know I'm a Christian and I'd be prepared to die for Jesus? It's rotten scum like you who sent him to the cross. Power, that's all you want, God damn you! What do you know of love between two Christian souls?", cried the young man.

The other ignored his insults and, for the third time asked: "Where is it?".

Toribio did not react.

Then, in a strange sibilant voice, Oppa pronounced his verdict: "As you wish, then, Christian turd! You will be my prisoner until you cough up the truth. Yes, I want the whole truth from your stupid mouth. As for the daughter of that Visigoth fool so set on revenge, she will soon be in the hands of Munuza, who will penetrate her a thousand times in less than a twelvemonth."

Oppa's laughter echoed around the cavern and increased Toribio's sense of impotence. He would have liked to kill that vile being, but was unable even to move. Again he fainted away and collapsed helpless on the carpet of fetid moss.

Oppa left the cavern and walked along a mule track to another cave nearby, whose entrance was guarded by stalagmites resembling rotten teeth. The wind blew through them, producing a strangled fluting sound. Oppa went in, found some steps and descended an unguarded staircase into the dark. As he advanced cautiously, the luminous point of his staff cast a dim light on enormous cavities, gigantic columns and massive arches covered with mould and spider's webs. He felt currents of warm air rising from the depths below, while, all around, the glow of his staff revealed other stairways and tunnels leading endlessly up and down, disappearing into space or spiralling down the walls of the abyss.

Some three hundred steps down, the staircase reached a sort of landing giving access to a hall with towering walls of black granite, smooth as mirrors. He advanced confidently to the centre of the room and stopped before an altar of purple-veined porphyry. Here he took a pouch from his belt and sprinkled the sulphur and phosphorus it contained on the altar. Then he began reciting spells in Latin. Nothing. He tried Greek and Egyptian, then Phoenician, and finally Aramaic. Only then did the walls of the temple begin to shake, a wind blew even in these hidden depths, the sulphur exploded in a merry-go-round of flame and the phosphorus lit up the room with a greenish light. But instead of scenes of the Twelve Events, or the gems of the crosses, or the faces of their carriers, there appeared another eleven demons, reunited once again.

"*Nemo operabit sine voluntate domini, Oppas!*", pronounced one of the demons, wrapped in a vermilion toga, with a complexion like a dirty, stained piece of parchment. He had a wispy goatee beard, a hooked nose and eyes covered with cataracts reminiscent of those of a fried fish. Oppa looked at him in irritation, well understanding the sarcastic intention behind his words.

"The boy won't talk!", he snapped angrily, and cursed.

"Aha! So you've been worsted by a child!", broke in another demon, tall and thin as a beanpole, with long greasy hair hanging down the sides of his face.

"You're one to talk, Crodinus of Friesland! Wasn't it you who lost us the Jasper on the Catalaunian Fields?", shot back Oppa.

Crodinus assumed the expression of a rabid dog: "Ah! You disgusting piece of Beelzebub shit. You lied to me. You gave me the identity of the Gepid Arboric, companion of the valorous Ardaric. But you didn't tell me that Theodoric's Visigoths included a regiment of mounted archers who would massacre us without mercy!"

Oppa became quite animated. "So now you blame me? Have you forgotten that Attila's cavalry was far more reliable and highly trained? Why didn't you advise Ardaric to wait for the Hun horsemen to attack the enemy wings, as they had always done, instead of urging the Gepids to make a frontal attack which upset everyone's plans? It was your fault we lost that battle and the Jasper escaped us! That's what you are: an incompetent piece of shit!"

The other fell silent and lowered his eyes.

"The boy, he's the carrier, isn't he? Why not devour him and have done with it?", said another demon, short, dark and hairy as a ram.

"Really? What a brilliant suggestion, Facronte of Greece. Haven't you ever thought of Free Will, which makes our lives so difficult? Didn't you make a big enough cock-up by attacking the carrier of the Onyx at the Battle of Saxa Rubra? Imbecile!", replied Oppa.

The other was reduced to silence, remembering the episode that had cost them all chance of securing the first stone.

"Oppa is right, carriers cannot be killed. That would give the Lord of Goodness a good pretext for annihilating us! All we can do is corrupt them!", interjected a purple-skinned demon with a squat face and prominent jaws like those of a wild boar.

"Quite right, Jabalius of Toledo. You are the most intelligent of this squad of cretins! So, since you know it all , let us have your counsel !", growled Oppa.

Jabalius thought for a moment, while the others watched him, faces straining with rage.

"Well? Hasn't studying all those years with the rabbis from Byzantium got your brain working? Tell us what to do, big head!", railed Polistaffius of Forum Juliae.

Jabalius picked up a stone and threw it at him, at which the other just laughed and swore.

"Oppa, send that chubby little baby to Toledo! The prisons of Al Hizam will soften him up and maybe, under torture, he will speak!", proposed Jabalius.

Then, after a pause, he added: "And if he won't talk, we can always use him as bait to trap his father! When that yokel falls into my hands—and you devise the means—, I'll corrupt him and make him sick up all he knows. One way or another, we'll find that wretched cross, and then the others. We still have ten chances to stop those twelve servants of Goodness. And if we can find out which the last cross is, all we need do is wait. So in the end our Beloved Beast will triumph for ever. And we'll eat those Apostles roasted on a spit . . . I can already see them with their wings singed, crying out in agony . . . Ha, ha, ha!"

The other demons joined in the laughter. "Then all the men and women in this world will be ours to have our way with!", he concluded.

The devils seemed to relish this prospect. Maybe they were just a step away from final victory.

"Well done, Jabalius. In Byzantium they did not fill your skull with sawdust, as I feared. We'll take your advice. But if it goes wrong, you'll be on your way back to our Lord at the speed of light!", proclaimed Oppa, whose skin had turned scaly as that of a snake. Then he recited a spell in Aramaic and all of them disappeared in a whirl of stinking dust. Finding himself alone, Oppa returned slowly to the surface, the red light from his staff falling on those steps that had remained hidden for ages past.

When he reached the shelter on the edge of the ravine, Oppa ordered the Arabs to take Toribio and bring him to Tariq. He wrote a short message on a wax tablet and handed it to them.

"Give this to your general, with my compliments!", he snapped.

Then he turned to the Berbers and told them to take Agasinda to Munuza. Afterwards, Oppa left the hut, walked to the edge of the ravine and threw himself over the precipice, disappearing in an explosion of red dust.

Meanwhile, the Arabs had recovered Toribio's stunned body and loaded it onto one of their horses. Bidding farewell to the Berbers, they made off southwards. The Berbers meanwhile took charge of Agasinda, who had never regained consciousness, and made their way north.

The men were satisfied with their prey, but not so Oppa: the demon feared he had flunked his third attempt to grasp the secret of the Twelve Gemmed Crosses.

CHAPTER XV

SAN MARTÍN DE TURIENO

"He was black as pitch with flaming eyes, but you couldn't see his face. And as for his voice . . . !", the young shepherd girl was telling her friend, as they climbed the road to the monastery, followed by a straggling flock of sheep and a gaggle of geese.

"What was his voice like, then?", asked her companion.

"It was like the roar of a wild beast!", said the first girl.

"Are you sure it wasn't the horse?", asked the other.

"No . . . but his horse was strange, too . . . jet black and shaggy-haired, but the voice was the rider's, I assure you!", insisted the shepherd girl.

The other cast a quick glance at her mob of web-footed charges, then turned back to her friend, fascinated and troubled by her description of the individual who had accosted her on the road descending from the Monsacri a few days earlier.

"What did he want from you?", she asked.

"He was looking for the monastery!"

"And you told him where it was?"

"Of course I did! And prayed he would go away quickly. What else could I do?"

The other looked down to see the track leading to the hermitage of San Michel.

"Maybe he was just one of those black friars; they belong to another order, but they are kind as well!", concluded the goose girl.

"Let's hope so!", agreed the first girl, calling in her dog, which was trying to round up the rest of the sheep along the hillside.

The monastery nestled in gentle dip in the hills to the west of Mount Viorna, just above the village of Turieno. It was already quite old, having been founded two or three centuries earlier, but it was not unique. There were other religious communities in the vicinity, like the abbey of Santa Maria de Cosgaya and the monasteries of Tanarrio, Acquae Calidae and Villenia. One thing they had in common was their nearness to the

River Deva, which at this altitude was still a torrent, rising near Mount Arcamo and fed by numerous streams descending from the permanently snow-covered peaks of the Monsacri massif.

There were two accounts of the origins of San Martín: some said it had been founded by a bishop of Astorga, who had brought a wooden crucifix from Jerusalem; others by a holy man from Palencia, who had come with five companions to spend the rest of his life as a hermit in a nearby cave. Whatever the truth, the monastery was well-known to travellers and pilgrims coming down from the Asturian and Cantabrian coasts, who stopped there before going on to Palencia, to the south, or Amaya, to the south east.

The building was complex in layout, consisting of a church with a nave and two aisles, each culminating in an apse, and at the western end a square, fortress-like tower, much higher than the rest of the building. For this reason, access to the church was from the south side, where there were two arched doorways, one known as the Gate of Salvation. Carved above the doors were images of the twelve apostles and other figures, including Constantine, the first Christian emperor, and Pope Leo I, who had helped to stop the advancing Huns.

The monastery itself was attached to the north side of the church, consisting of a square cloister and inner courtyard paved with porphyry, with arcades all round, above which the monks' dormitories were arranged on three floors. There were also two long, rectangular wings, set at an angle to the cloister, which housed the refectory, the scriptorium, the Aula Magna, where important ceremonies were held, a large library, and the abbot's office. From here each morning were issued the orders directing the monks who tended the vines, made hay, and cultivated barley, oats and rye, as well as the grooms, cooks, herbalists, blacksmiths and, of course, the inevitable crowd of scribes, who were always complaining about the poorly lit desks in the scriptorium, and turned up each morning with bags under their eyes and writer's cramp.

From here, too, were sent messages to the neighbouring monasteries, epistles for the bishop of Palencia, who was in charge of all the communities in these valleys, and sometimes sealed despatches for the Metropolitan of Toledo, or even the Roman Pontiff himself. So there was a constant coming and going of people from all over Hispania: clerics and knights, peasant farmers and merchants, free men and slaves, rich and poor, who always found here something to eat, a place to sleep and, if need be, provender for

their horses. In exchange, they left money, gifts in kind, merchandise and, especially in the case of the poor, a wealth of prayers to the Virgin.

But now the monastery seemed more busy and chaotic than usual. All were aware of the imminent wedding of Duke Pelayo's son and the daughter of General Teodomir. People were coming in from the outlying villages each day, mainly to admire the clothing and weaponry of the guests and to get the latest gossip. The large square in front of the church already accommodated the tents of Bartuelo's five hundred Asturians and the three hundred Visigoths commanded by Fafila.

But the populace wanted to know where the quality were lodged. Many rumours were batted back and forwards after mass, from nine in the morning until vespers. Some said that *domnus* Pelayo, *domna* Gaudiosa and their children were housed in the best cells on the top floor, beside the quarters of Abbot Paciano, while Froliuba, her mother *domna* Isilde, and *domnus* Petro were being put up in the guest quarters, the farthest part of the eastern wing of the monastery. Others maintained that *domnus* Petro, being the senior duke and lord of Amaya, should be accommodated in the best rooms above the cloister, while the others should be lodged in the guest quarters, or even, in the case of the smaller fry, in rooms in the west tower.

Meanwhile the monks had decorated the aisles and inner walls of the church, the refectory and the Aula Magna with gorgeous orange, purple, crimson and green draperies. They had also installed white standards displaying the crismon symbol, dark blue flags embroidered with gold crosses and spangled with imitation gemstones, and ribbons and tassels which wound their way around the arches of ceiling and windows. In the corridors were enormous bouquets of roses, lilies, dahlias and hortensias, which on the Sunday morning would be arranged around the entrance to the church and the columns of the nave.

Monks with carpentry skills were busy making new benches, chairs, stools and tables for the guests. The cooks had already sent the herbalists and apothecaries to collect huge quantities of aromatic plants for the wedding feast, and were arguing over the menu. Some were also grumbling about the instructions they had received regarding the choice of wines.

In fact, no one was yet clear as to the order of events. The majority thought the guests would gather with the Abbot in the Aula Magna and, from there, would escort the bride and groom across the great square, probably cleared of the soldiers' tents, to the church, which they would

enter by the Gate of Salvation. Others thought that the families, relatives and friends of the couple would wait for them inside the church, except for the witnesses and godparents, who would accompany them up the aisle.

"And who is to be Froliuba's godfather, given that her real father was killed on the Rio Gades?", asked brother Vicentio, busy attaching more draperies to the third column on the left of the nave, while brother Prudentio held the ladder.

"Good question. They're getting married tomorrow and we don't even know that. Paciano seems to be a bit slow. He hasn't even told us where the nobles and knights are to be seated, and whether the commoners can stand at the back or will have to wait outside."

"They say the mass is to be celebrated by a Benedictine from elsewhere, a certain Valerio de Amaya . . .", continued his companion, trying to ignore the insinuations about the Abbot's inefficiency.

"That really is odd. Weddings up here have always been conducted by our own clergy. I've lived here for thirty years and nothing like this has ever happened in my time. Old Abbot Gundulfus must be turning in his grave!", commented Prudentio.

Vicentio laughed: "What is it that riles you about Paciano? I reckon he does his best; he can't know everything, can he?"

"Of course, I don't want to criticise him unjustly, but I've noticed a change in him; maybe he pays too much attention to his advisors . . .", reflected Prudentio.

"Who are you referring to? Brother Sisisclo has been here for ten years and has always been concerned with our welfare. But for him, we would not have the pharmacy and the hospital!", countered Vicentio.

"No, I've nothing against Sisisclo . . . he's an old friend of mine, too . . . it's the other one . . . the new one . . . that Monofonso de Palencia who's just arrived . . . a strange looking chap . . . I really don't like the look of him!".

"What exactly is it that disturbs you?", asked Vicentio.

"He looks like a piece of parchment!", replied the other, opening wide the palms of his hands and lifting them to his jaws.

Vicentio looked at him, silent for a moment, then broke into a hearty guffaw. Prudentio could not control himself either.

"We'd better down tools for the moment. It's nearly time for the noonday mass and we still have to clear up!", he added, finally regaining control of himself.

So the two monks placed the ladder near the main door and made their way to the kitchen, curious to know what was cooking.

That morning, Pelayo and Fafila were inspecting the men camped in front of the monastery. There was bite in the air and a strong wind was blowing under heavy black clouds. The Duke was soon joined by Petro and Hernando, who had breakfasted together in Liuva and Teudiselo's tent. Tension was written on their faces. Hernando did not try to hide his concern at Toribio's delay and, naturally, the Visigoth leader and his son were worried too.

"He should have been here yesterday", said Pelayo.

"The journey from Santa Maria de Monsacri takes only two days on horseback", added Fafila.

Petro was silent.

"If they haven't arrived by this evening, I'll go and find them myself!", proposed the Judge from Valle, searching the nervous faces of the others one by one.

"No, brother-in-law, we won't let you go alone; I'll give you an escort of my . . . but let's wait . . . and pray", suggested the Duke of Amaya, stealing a glance at the sky, which had come over darker than ever.

The two walked up and down in silence through the Asturians' encampment. Bartuelo was standing to attention in an open area in front of his own tent, and there he had lined up his officers, young lads for the most part, still sweating from their morning exercises.

"Dismiss them, Bartuelo, so they can get some rest. We shall be leaving tomorrow, immediately after the wedding, and it is still a long way to Amaya", advised Petro.

The Asturian gave the order to break ranks and the relief on the faces of his men was palpable. Meanwhile the storm had begun and large drops of rain were falling.

"We'd better get back to our cells. The Abbot has invited us to the three o'clock mass, then to a rehearsal of the wedding service in the Aula Magna. If they have not arrived by then, we'll send out a search party. Does that satisfy you, Judge Hernando?", asked Pelayo.

The man with the leather helmet and crows' feathers nodded somewhat sulkily, but he knew he could count on them: Pelayo's daughter and sister were also at risk, so the Duke could not fob him off. Anyway, there was no time to argue. It was now raining cats and dogs, so they hurried back to the monastery.

The mass was well attended, the church crowded with Asturian and Visigoth soldiers. Pelayo's family, Froliuba and her mother were seated in the front row. The Duke of Cangas de Onis was wearing a fine turquoise tunic under a white woollen cape spangled with amethysts; his wife the lilac-coloured dress she often wore at home, but with a long cloak of light-blue silk. By her side was Ermesinda, muffled in a purple cloak and hood. Fafila had not bothered to change and was still in his steel breastplate, while Froliuba wore the short white gown that seemed almost part of her. Her mother Isilde, a noblewoman of around thirty, Celtic in features, was also dressed in white, with a circlet of flowers on her brow. Hernando would have preferred to remain in the guest apartments, but Petro had persuaded him to attend.

Abbot Paciano, a man of medium height, corpulent, white-haired, with a head shaped like an apple, preached at length, taking as his text the chapter in the Acts of the Apostles telling the story of Simon Mago. It was based on a sermon copied by the monks from a manuscript of Cromatius of Aquileia.

He began as follows: "*The kingdom of heaven is like a father, the head of a family, who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went away . . .*

"You know how the parable continues. Here then our Lord and Saviour refers to himself as a father, the head of a family. In using this term, he wants to show his great love for us, given that he presents himself not only as head of the family, but as father. The name *Lord* is clearly explained when he says through the Prophet: *If I am Lord, where is the honour due to me; if I am a father where is the respect due to me?* He declares himself to be Lord so that we should fear him, but father so that we should love him.

"So this father sows in us the good seed, that is the word of faith, of truth, which he scatters in the furrows of our soul with the plough of the cross, so that righteousness will take root in us and produce fruits worthy

of faith. However, the enemy comes along and scatters tares over it, that is the seed of evil and unbelief. And those over whom the enemy is able to scatter such seed are clearly identified. *While everyone was asleep*, it says in the Gospel, the enemy scatters the tares over those he finds sleeping, that is overwhelmed by the sleep of unbelief; but those who are vigilant in the faith, he cannot and will not abandon. So for example Adam, in whose soul the Lord first sowed the good seed, would never have succumbed to the devil if he had been attentive to the Lord's instructions. But, finding him asleep, that is overcome by the slumber of negligence, the enemy immediately sowed tares in him, so that Adam bore the fruit of death, rather than of life."

Seated between Fafila and Ermesinda, Pelayo drank the words in. He felt the sermon was meant for him: father of a family, but also of a whole people, of all the families of Hispania! At last he fully understood the importance of his role: that of a father who loves all his children, now threatened by the confusion brought by the evil one, who was pressing at the doors with his host of demons. It was time to practise righteousness and produce fruits *worthy of faith.*

It was not by chance this sermon was being preached: through this Abbot, God himself was reaching out to him. All he need do was courageously take up the invitation as a true Christian, make the effort required of him at this moment in history. As he listened, he exchanged glances with Gaudiosa. It was as if she too understood what was happening and approved with the enthusiasm of a woman in love with her man, the head of their family, the father of their children and of their needy people.

The Abbot's words had a similar effect on another father in the congregation: the pagan Hernando. After all, he too was the head of a family. True, he had only one son, whom he loved so very much, but at the same time he was a judge, like the God of the parable, whose task was to defend his people from every injustice and keep them free of "tares". And what if he too had been called by that one God? If he too had been invited to play his part in that mysterious plan the old man in the cave on Pico Dobra had referred to?

And what if Erudino were just a shadow of a far greater and more powerful God who had always been anxiously watching over the world, the heavenly bodies, the animals and the men he had created? A father God who inculcated fear on account of his justice, but also a father full of

love for his children, to the point of allowing them to decide what to do with their lives? And what if Toribio had been right to believe in that God? These were the questions that sermon had raised in Hernando's mind. On impulse, he looked for the figure of Valerio among the monks sitting alongside the Abbot. Not finding him, he searched among the congregation, but saw only the faces of the soldiers kneeling at their benches. The monk was not there.

After mass, the Judge should have joined the others in the Aula Magna, but he was not at peace. He had to speak with Valerio. Maybe he felt the need to apologise for treating him so badly all these years. He followed the passageways leading to the cloister and crossed the porphyry-flagged courtyard, jumping the puddles that had formed there. He stopped a cellarer monk and asked him the way to Valerio's room, then climbed the stairs two by two to the second floor and knocked on the door. No reply. Suddenly he felt fear, a premonition of something unexpected and unwelcome. He threw open the door and saw the monk, kneeling before a large wooden cross, to which was nailed the God he had so often wanted to sweep out of his mind.

Valerio looked shocked and anguished. "It has disappeared! This is the end!", he said.

"What has disappeared?", asked the Judge.

"The cross! I had a dream: I saw the devils kidnapping your son and Agasinda!".

Hernando felt faint.

"What are you talking about? What cross? What do you know about it, Valerio?"

It was the first time Hernando had used Valerio's name, rather than insulting him as "monk of Byzantium".

Valerio was weeping silently.

"I saw Arab and Berber horsemen: the Berbers carried off Agasinda to take her to Xixon and hand her over to that lustful Munuza, while the Arabs were taking your son to Toledo to force him tell the whole truth about the cross!", burst out the monk, trembling and agitated.

Hernando was almost bursting with rage.

"I can't believe it. So you knew about the Ruby Cross? Who told you about it? Toribio?", he asked, convulsed with fury.

"Toribio told me all about it on the road to Porto Vereasueca. It's time you understood, Hernando: we are in the middle of a struggle between Good and Evil. Why do you still refuse to see?", cried the monk, grabbing the Judge by his chest armour and addressing him in familiar terms.

Hernando was as if paralysed, not knowing what to say.

"I need to think!", he said, and bowed down in a corner of the cell. "Tell me what is happening, Valerio! I admit I can't cope myself!".

So Valerio blessed him and told him the whole story. At the end, Hernando was even more disturbed than before.

"Come to the Aula Magna with me straight away. We need to speak to Petro and Pelayo. There's no time to lose!", spluttered the knight from Valle.

They hurried down the marble steps, ran along the cloister arcade and passed through a narrow door giving access to a vestibule with pink walls covered in blue flags with golden cross motifs. They then took another corridor and climbed a wide staircase to the first floor. Still running, they came to a red door at the end of the corridor, where Liuva and Teudiselo were standing guard, lances by their sides. The muscular lieutenants smiled under their gilded nose-guards and opened the door for them. The pair were now in an enormous hall with walls half white-washed, half panelled in walnut. Against the walls were long rows of high, narrow pews, with dozens of lecterns and hundreds of candle holders. In the middle, before a solid maple-wood throne , stood Abbot Paciano, surrounded by his assistants, Duke Petro, Pelayo and his family, Froliuba and her mother Isilde.

The Abbot had just been explaining the order of service for Sunday and was about to hand out papyri with the vows the bride and groom and witnesses would have to pronounce, when he was interrupted by the pair's undignified arrival. Everyone turned round. Pelayo looked at them in confusion. Petro seemed irritated.

"This is strange behaviour, monk Valerio. You are the one who is officiating at this wedding, yet here you are late", he observed with a frown of disapproval.

But Hernando replied in the monk's stead.

"I fear the wedding will have to be postponed. Valerio has dreamed that the Saracens have kidnapped my son and Agasinda!", he broke in breathlessly.

All eyes were on the Byzantine monk, who slowly looked up and addressed Pelayo: "Just so, my Lord", he said.

Pelayo remained cold as ice. Gaudiosa started sobbing. Ermesinda did not understand. Fafila looked at Froliuba, who immediately put her arms round him. Isilde sat down on the bench beside her and covered her face with her hands.

"Tell us the whole story, good Valerio", said Abbot Paciano, handing the papers with the marriage lines to brother Sisisclo.

So the monk from Amaya recounted his dream, but made no mention of the Ruby Cross. Anxiety was writ large on all their faces, except that of brother Monofonso, who merely listened, his parchment face impassive and expressionless.

Outside, through the transparent screens of the high three-arched windows, the sky was still ugly and threatening. After Valerio had finished, a heavy silence weighed on the small gathering. Most did not want to believe this evil prognostication, reluctant to accept such bad news as they prepared for a happy event.

Then the sky was rent by a roll of thunder and a moment later they heard the shouts of Liuva and Teudiselo announcing the arrival of a messenger.

The eyes of the assembled company, still shocked by the chilling visions of Valerio's dream, were fixed on the doorway to the great room. Another thunderbolt fell, even closer to the monastery. On the threshold stood a young fellow with his breastplate unlaced, no helmet, hair dirty and in disorder, a pimply triangular face daubed with mud. He staggered to the centre of the room and knelt before Pelayo and Petro.

"They have killed them all, my lords, our soldiers, the nuns, the abbess . . .", he reported and fell to the ground exhausted.

Sisisclo ran out and returned almost immediately with an infusion of rosemary. A few moments later, Fruela had recovered enough to speak and tell them what he had seen. He admitted he had fled, but then had changed his mind and returned to the abbey. Too late. The Saracens had massacred all the Asturians and the nuns. He had found Verosinda's body, but there was no trace of Toribio or Agasinda.

"The sapphire, the pendant with the sapphire! Did you see it round my sister's neck?", asked Pelayo, shaking the young man.

"No, my Lord, I saw nothing round her neck. She was dead, but her eyes seemed to look up to heaven and were as fresh as the dew. That's all I saw!".

Pelayo was overcome with emotion. He went down on his knees, then swore, looked up and cursed again. "I swear by almighty God that I will find those animals and make them pay dear for what they have done to my most holy sister!".

Petro tried to calm him, but he was shaking with rage. Meanwhile, Gaudiosa pressed the hands of Hernando, whose features had become like marble, and Valerio tried to console little Ermesinda, who was still screaming with fear. Then Fafila, who had sought Froliuba's eyes in vain, announced: "I will go and free her. Father, a marriage that begins like this will bring no good. Froliuba and I can wait. Give me a hundred men and I will leave for Xixon this very day!"

Pelayo looked gratefully at his son, but was uncertain. It did not seem honourable to discharge onto his son the obligation to avenge such an offence. Should he, who had identified himself with the father in Abbot Paciano's sermon, send his son in his stead? What would the millions of his other children say? What would Hispania think of such a father? But Isilde seemed to read his thoughts:

"Duke Pelayo, you cannot leave your men now. Your lieutenants need you here to keep morale high in the western garrisons, where we know the bulk of the enemy forces will attack. Men are also needed down there at the Reina Pass, which you have not yet inspected. If you abandon them all now to go in search of your daughter, we shall have to spend days waiting without you, with a ruthless enemy drawing near!"

Pelayo listened to her words and for the first time a soft light came into his cobalt eyes.

"Domna Isilde, such wisdom and love for my people I would not have expected from the best and most valorous of my counsellors. But the duty you are reminding me of is a hard one. How can I remain up here when those devils are dishonouring my daughter and my family name?", he replied, looking, maybe without realising it, at Toribio's father.

The latter had slumped onto a bench and seemed to have no intention of giving an opinion. His brown eyes were fixed on the floor. Maybe he had lost for ever his one and only son. All on account of this cursed war. All on account of that cursed invitation from his brother-in-law. If he had ignored it and sent Gunderic back, courteously declining to get involved,

he would not now be down here grieving over this terrible emptiness. Maybe he had never been a good father, but he knew he had loved that blond, blue-eyes lad with the fresh, easy-going face that always restored his good humour.

Now he realised he had been motivated by pride: wanting to be acknowledged at court, to become the equal of a Visigoth patrician, to enhance his prestige—no longer a poor judge in a frontier area, but a true county nobleman . . . maybe at last a count. Now he saw the pass to which his dreams of greatness, and the envy he had nursed for years against the neighbouring counts of San Emeterio, Flaviobriga and even Calahorra, had finally brought him. But what should he do now? From whom could he ask forgiveness? Were not all of them men like him? Proud and ambitious like him? Determined to fight to the bitter end provided they could fulfil their desires?

Certainly, Toribio was different. He did not seem interested in money, nor even power. He almost always spoke of Jesus, the son of the one God, who by some great mystery was also a father. The others were different from his boy . . . with the exception of his teacher. And at that very moment he felt the monk's hand rest on his shoulder.

"We shall find him, Hernando. If they have taken him to Toledo, we shall go there together!"

Hernando looked at the monk with tenderness. It was the first time such an expression had appeared on his lined and angry features.

"I believe I have been wrong about you, Valerio. Now I understand why Toribio loved you so much", the words slipped from his lips.

The monk made no reply. He blessed that suffering face and went down on his knees.

"I shall be your servant, lord Judge of Valle! Let us go to Toledo straight away!".

Petro had overheard their conversation and now intervened in his loud baritone:

"And you will go there in secret, riding by night and resting by day, so as not to be seen by the enemy. And you shall not go alone. You will go with Liuva and Teudiselo, my most valorous men, and we will find the best guide between here and Narbonne", said the Duke of Amaya and immediately called his lieutenants who were watching by the door.

Then Fruela, too, stood up, went to Hernando and knelt before him.

"Take me, too. May my blood pay for the cowardice I showed in that abbey. Toribio was and still is my commander. He is the only one who has treated me with respect. I, too, will be the servant of his father", cried the boy, his voice broken with emotion.

Hernando looked on him with compassion, not wanting to say anything that would humiliate him. Then he raised his eyes and saw that everyone present had witnessed the formation of that eccentric company.

"Hernando, this is a sign from God!", said Pelayo, his eyes lit with a strange joy. "If God has removed our children and taken back to himself those we loved so dearly, it is because he wants us to follow him together! I will treat you as an equal and want you to be my count till death part us!", he said, instinctively looking towards Petro.

The older Duke moved towards Hernando. "Stand up, brother-in-law".

The women and monks present were slow in understanding what was going on, but the warriors immediately understood what Petro intended to do. Hernando got to his feet, shaking like a leaf. Petro borrowed Liuva's broadsword and said: "Now kneel!"

Hernando obeyed him, almost toppling over. The Duke of Amaya lifted the sword over his head and cried in a loud voice: "I, Petro, Duke of Amaya, son of Gesaleic, son of Turismond, Duke of Cantabria and most senior nobleman of the Gothic race of this land, dub you, Hernando Del Valle, Judge on my behalf of Valle de Autrigonia and the Autrigonian and Cantabrian peoples living there, count of all those lands and my knight, in the name of God, Christ our Saviour and the Very Holy Virgin Mary!"

So saying, he laid the flat of the blade on his brother-in-law's head and brought it down with force on each of his shoulders. At that moment, a thunderclap resounded outside, shaking the benches in the hall. But no one took fright. Rather, those present applauded and Gaudiosa insisted on kissing the hand of the new nobleman.

Pelayo thanked Petro and congratulated Hernando. Then he announced: "On this day of unfortunate news, God has consoled us with proof of his faithfulness and friendship, shedding light in our hearts and making our alliance all the stronger. So we postpone this wedding until better days and shall set off at dawn. You, Fafila, will take a hundred horsemen and will go from here directly to Xixon to free your sister. You, Hernando, will go in secret to Toledo, with Liuva and Teudiselo, Valerio, an expert guide and . . .", here he hesitated, "this young Asturian . . . to liberate your

son. I shall accompany you as far as the Reina Pass. There we will go our separate ways. And may God and the Virgin bless us!"

Having said this, he looked to Petro, who immediately ordered his lieutenants to get the soldiers ready.

CHAPTER XVI

FLAVIUS THE ROMAN

"That Monofonso who was with Abbot Paciano . . . he was the one who gave me the message, immediately after Fafila and his men left for the coast", replied Hernando, absorbed in adjusting his hold on Ederedo's reins, his hair streaming out behind him.

Valerio seemed less than convinced: "He told you to look for this . . . What did he say his name was?"

"Kupraman! That's what he said! Apparently he's a Jew, very well known in Toledo . . . not that I like those people much. They have long crooked noses and think only of making money at our expense . . . But that Monofonso told me he is well acquainted with the Saracens and is the only one who can help us", replied the man with the crow's feather crest.

The monk, looking calmer and more relaxed than on the previous day, rode along beside him on Witisclo, who, after two hours' journey, was beginning to show the first signs of hunger. But Valerio had no intention of slowing his pace. They were nearing their objective: the snow-covered mountains of the Reina Pass, and the pointed stakes of the first line of defence were clearly visible.

"Monofonso? I didn't much like the look of that brother. A strange fellow. He spoke little but whispered a great deal in the Abbot's ear. And I've never seen that kind of black habit. I don't know what order he belongs to", commented Valerio, with a worried look.

"Well, it's the only lead we've got. I've never been to Toledo. Do you know anyone down there who could help us find out where Toribio is?", asked the Judge, still swaying unsteadily on Ederedo's back, as they climbed a wide cart road overlooking a fertile green valley in which the young wheat was sprouting.

"No, only a few monks and one or two patricians, but I fear they may have been imprisoned or killed by Tariq's Berbers. Of course, a Jew could well be useful, given that they are allied with the enemy. But I don't know . . . that Monofonso was distinctly odd . . . that's all I can say", brooded the Benedictine monk.

"Let's not listen to our fears! If God leads us by roundabout ways, we'll just have to take them. I'll listen to this Kupraman, then we'll decide what to do. But I'm not stupid. I'll take all necessary precautions", affirmed Hernando.

Valerio did not seem greatly reassured. He too wanted to find Toribio as quickly as possible. He hoped his friend was safe and the Ruby Cross still in his hands, but perhaps he was being too optimistic. He began praying inwardly.

Meanwhile, the squadron of Asturians led by Bartuelo had reached the pass. They were followed by Pelayo's Visigoths and the litter carrying his womenfolk, Isilde and her daughter, then by Petro and his lieutenants, Hernando and Valerio, and finally young Fruela, who had taken Toribio's horse. Fruela suddenly noticed a black figure riding the crest of a ridge to the south, but he did not pay much attention, except to the horse, which even at that distance seemed exceptionally shaggy-haired. Messengers were criss-crossing the whole of Hispania in those days . . . one more, one less . . . it was certainly not worth pointing this one out to his seniors. In any case, he was ashamed to ask anything of those knights. They were real men, not cowards like him. It was amazing enough that they had taken him with them, after his previous failure.

To Pelayo's practised eye, the defences were similar to those he had already visited and inspected at the passes of the Magdalena and the Corona: long palisades of fir trunks erected on earthworks, interrupted at intervals by square wooden towers, on which were mounted light catapults and oxybeles. The only difference was in the height of the towers. These were higher and better constructed, with solid parapets providing cover to shoulder height. The Visigoth Duke exchanged approving looks with Bartuelo and Petro, who were riding on either side of him, then stopped by the guardhouse, dismounted and reviewed the Asturian soldiery. They were dressed in rough and ready fashion with leather body armour and wooden shields. They were all under twenty and relatively few in number. Clearly, many of them were from farming stock and had never before engaged in real combat. The majority lacked proper helmets, which seemed to annoy Bartuelo, whose five hundred men were all armed to the teeth.

But Pelayo was not inclined to reprimand them.

"I've seen worse", he said. "At least this lot are well protected by the defence works. It would be hard for a maniple of Saracens to get through

this way without heavy losses. If they try, we have sufficient reinforcements to deal with them!"

Bartuelo was about to comment but Petro intervened:

"This is a difficult pass of little strategic value. If the bulk of them arrive via Oviedo, we needn't worry too much up here", stated the old Duke. "Don't fret, Bartuelo! We must give priority to Amaya. Let Xilo and Pelayo take care of things in the west", he added.

Bartuelo reluctantly held his tongue. A pity: he would have liked to stay in the Asturias with his old leader, Xilo, not to mention Milio, Abilio, Cilio and Naelio, but there was no time. His lot was the ancient Cantabrian city, and maybe that was as it should be. Amaya, the invincible, which had held out against Romans and Goths, was now to be defended by his men. If God was calling him to make that sacrifice, he must accept and hold his peace.

The knights walked among the improvised militia, checking munitions, catapults and ballistae. Finally, they inspected the ditches and pits that had been dug and concealed with brushwood directly in front of the palisades. An icy wind was blowing at this height and Pelayo knew that Petro and Bartuelo were in a hurry.

Hernando and Valerio, too, were anxious.

"We must get going, Pelayo. Where is this guide of yours?", asked the Judge from Cantabria.

"Patience, Count Hernando! I know they are searching for him. He shouldn't be long", replied the Visigoth leader, thoughtfully scrutinising the pits bristling with sharp stakes at his feet.

"We can't afford to wait until vespers! We'd best leave while there is still some light . . . given that there is still a long way to go before we enter enemy territory", observed Hernando, his nerves beginning to get the better of him.

"Don't worry, I know that road like the back of my hand", came the voice of a man who had ridden up behind them.

They turned round abruptly. The speaker, mounted on a white charger, was thrown into relief by a sudden ray of sunshine. He wore a short-sleeved red toga and over it a splendid breastplate, the straps of which were tied at the back with leather laces. A skirt of bronze protected his groin, and his thorax was studded with gilded medallions representing Roman gods and goddesses. Round his neck was a yellow scarf. His handsome face was that of a man of thirty with mild features, except for his square jaw and

ferret-sharp eyes, while jet black hair escaped from his imposing gilded helmet with its erect red crest. His rectangular shield was painted blue. A short stabbing sword and a dagger hung from his belt, while to his back was lashed a Roman pilum. From his shoulders flew a yellow cape.

"Flavius, son of Marius!", he introduced himself. "You sent for me to guide you to Toledo."

The riders were amazed. It was the first time they had seen a Roman soldier in full military kit.

"Flavius the Roman, then?", exclaimed Pelayo with great respect.

"*Ecce homo*! And you? Are you the Visigoth leader?", asked the man with a penetrating look.

"That is correct, and this is Petro, Duke of Amaya, and his lieutenants Liuva and Teudiselo, Bartuelo, chief of the Arcadeuni, Hernando, Count of Valle de Autrigonia, Valerio, of the order of St. Benedict and . . . where is the boy?", he said, suddenly stopping.

"Here I am! Here I am!", cried the young lad, who had got involved in a game of dice with the boys guarding the nearby palisade. They saw him running towards them, struggling with his breastplate and heavy Asturian weapons. He halted in front of Flavius and came to attention.

"Fruela, son of Froila, of the Arcadeuni, decurion to Toribio Del Valle!", he announced, stammering under his oversized helmet.

Flavius looked at him and smiled. "That means you should be commanding ten men. Where are the others, decurion Fruela?". The boy was quite at a loss.

"*Igitur, quid dicis? Vocem non audio!*", asked Flavius with severity.

Fruela was shaking with fear. He thought Flavius was a general, one of those his grandfather had told him about, like Belisarius, who had defeated the Vandals. How could he know it was two hundred years since the last real Roman army had taken the field? But that uniform had been described to him by the old folk in their stories round the fire, after the womenfolk had gone to bed. This must be a true Roman who had appeared out of the blue. Flavius softened his expression.

"All right, we'll take you, too, but one day you'll have to explain to me what you have done with your subordinates. I don't like cowards!", concluded the Roman.

Fruela was mortified, but Hernando came to his rescue.

"He's only a boy, he doesn't even know how to tie on a mace, but Toribio took a fancy to him and Fruela has sworn he wants to assist in his rescue, so I'll be his guarantor", said the Judge.

Flavius looked at this man dressed in a tunic the same colour as his, but with a rough leather chest protector and a ridiculous—surely non-regulation—helmet. Then, without comment, he turned to Pelayo.

"Anyone coming with me must know it will be tough. We shall have to travel by night and hole up by day. We shall need food for at least a week", he said, and quickly untied a saddlebag from the back of his horse.

He brought it over and took out some old papers. They were rolled-up maps. He selected one, unrolled it expertly and laid it on the ground. Then, with the point of his sword, he indicated the areas of interest:

"Look, this is Lake Reina, and there, *inter meridiem et occasum solis*, live the Vadinensi. We, however, will descend *inter meridiem et orientem solem*. You see there . . . that is Palencia. The road follows the Rio Pisoraca. It's the safest way. We are unlikely to meet with trouble . . . but where Palencia is concerned, I cannot promise anything. It may already be in enemy hands. We shall try to circumvent it, going via the springs of the Blackthorn Hills and camping in a cave.

"The next night we shall come down towards Villa Tolita, cross the Rio Pisoraca then the Rio Duero . . . and so reach the stone quarries of *Sanctus Stephanus* . . . marked just here . . .", he said, pointing out a hill marked right in the centre of the map. "On the third night, we shall leave Segovia on our left and, relying on the moon for light, make our way into the Sierra Grande. Here it is, at the bottom of the map. Just there. We'll cross the Bear Pass and, Jupiter willing, we shall be in Toledo by dawn on the following day. Is that clear, my fellow soldiers?", asked the veteran, thinking he had been clear enough.

"Yes", Hernando replied. "I understand, but how long will it take?"

"Three days and three nights", shot back their guide.

The Judge was well satisfied with this answer, but then Flavius asked how many of them there were.

"There are five of us, six counting yourself: me, this monk, these two Visigoths, who are brothers, and young Fruela", explained the newly elevated Count.

Flavius inspected Petro's lieutenants, scrutinising them from boots to helmet, and seemed satisfied. Then he took a quick look at Valerio, who was standing near his horse.

"Well, at least you've got decent horses. We've a long way to go and they will suffer hunger and thirst. You'd do well to bring a sufficiency of fodder and water, but not too much, because we have to travel light. I want to cover at least seventy miles each night."

"By Diana's arrows, how will we cover the ground so quickly?", asked Hernando.

"Flavius looked him up and down, then answered: "Speed is the key weapon of a good scout. That's what they taught me at school in Legio. But don't worry, I know how to make our horses fly!"

They listened to him, believed and asked no further questions.

They were to leave soon, having to reach the Palencia area by night. Pelayo therefore ordered a soldier from his escort to bring them more provisions for their saddlebags and a further supply of fodder for the horses. Then he went to warn the ladies they would soon be setting off for Cangas de Onis. Petro wanted to pay them his respects, as did Hernando and Valerio. This was very pleasing to Gaudiosa, who had been waiting anxiously behind the curtains of the litter. So the Duke of Amaya bade farewell to Pelayo's wife and daughter, who had alighted from the conveyance along with the other two.

Gaudiosa also wanted to embrace Valerio.

"Be of good courage, *domna* Gaudiosa, the Lord will save your son!", said the monk by way of encouragement.

Gaudiosa kissed his hands, then shook hands with Hernando.

"You, too, be brave, Count of Valle", said the Duchess. "I am confident that Toribio will be returned to us!"

The Judge thanked her, moved by her words, and with unwonted courtesy went down on his knee before her. Ermesinda allowed herself to be lifted up by the Byzantine monk and kissed on her fresh, milk-white cheeks.

"Tell Toribio that, if he comes back alive, I'll give him all our geese!"

The monk smiled tenderly, as did Hernando and the child's mother.

Petro also wanted to bid farewell to Froliuba, who was sobbing, and her mother Isilde, as calm as a statue. Pelayo, who had noticed the tears of his son's fiancée, approached her.

"Fear not, my daughter, Fafila will wed you, but we shall all be at the ceremony, together with Agasinda, you'll see, and all your friends!",

he promised, looking towards the northern mountains with anxiety in his gaze.

Isilde approved: "And this time they must return as victors!", concluded Teodomir's noble widow, cold and implacable.

Pelayo was the only one to perceive the immense hatred she still bore for the disastrous outcome of the battle of Rio Gades. He preferred to avoid her gaze.

"We'd better get a move on, then", he said.

So the women were accompanied to the litter, comfortably installed and saluted one final time before they set off with their escort. Then it was Petro and Bartuelo's turn. They rapidly made their farewells, Petro gave some last instructions to Liuva and Teudiselo, then laid his hands on his brother-in-law's shoulders and spoke some words of encouragement.

"I'm leaving you with the best of my men but, if you do not find him, we'll come down there with all the Visigoths of Cantabria and go through that city with a fine tooth comb. I swear it by the spirit of your Lions!", he promised, shaking Hernando's shoulders back and forwards.

Hernando accepted this vigorous embrace.

"God be with you, brother!", said the Judge.

"God be with you, Count of Valle", replied the other in his baritone, then added: "And God be with you, Valerio, loyal friend, and help them all with your prayers."

"That will be my special task, and maybe there will be more I can do", replied Valerio, touching the bag containing his medicines and surgical instruments.

Bartuelo bade farewell to Fruela without much ceremony:

"Watch out for yourself, son of Froila. This time, if you don't hold high the honour of the Arcadeuni, your father will throw you out for good!".

The lad, who was standing to attention in front of his chief, visibly swallowed out of fear.

"At the risk of dying disembowelled by an axe, I will keep faith with the flag of our people!", he replied trembling.

"That's right. Better a young bear killed on its own land than an old rabbit beyond the Sea of Ice!", insisted Bartuelo. Fruela understood exactly what he meant: the Asturians punished cowardice with banishment for life.

Pelayo saluted Petro and Hernando last. Then they all mounted their horses and the group broke up, some heading for Cangas, some for Amaya

and some for the south, where adventure awaited them. All knew that their mission was difficult in the extreme and prayed inwardly, each invoking his god, that they might achieve what was needful. Meanwhile the icy wind had died down and the sun broke through.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIERRA GRANDE

The six of them galloped all night without a break, lighting the way with the torches Flavius had prepared. There were no villages in those parts, only woods and endless open grassland. Nothing gave them cause for disquiet. In the early hours of the morning, Flavius halted at a crossroads. There was warmth in the air and they could at last smell the scents of the advancing spring. The woods had given way to a more Mediterranean type of vegetation. The open scrub land was punctuated here and there by medlar and fig trees. From the crossroads, long rows of plum trees stretched away and straggled up the slopes of the nearby hills. They were still in flower, but their overgrown branches and the surrounding weeds suggested that no one would be picking the fruit this year.

Flavius pointed out the milestone indicating the distance to Palencia, then gestured to them to dismount and follow him. Having taken a few sips of water from their canteens, the riders walked their horses along a tunnel of leafy branches that led to a cave. There they gave the horses some fodder and watered them at a rivulet from an underground spring. They then ate a little dried bacon and drank their ration of wine. Finally, they laid their weapons beside them and stretched out among the stones, using their saddlebags as pillows, and rested until sunset.

They had been travelling for seven hours on the second night when Flavius suddenly ordered a halt. Palencia was already well behind them, but they had not yet reached the Rio Pisoraca. It was a clear, moonlit night, getting warmer as they rode south. Their guide dismounted and advised them to do likewise.

"What's bothering you, Flavius?", asked Hernando.

"I thought I saw something moving down in the valley, possibly lights", replied the guide.

But at this point they were overtaken by events: a deadly flight of incoming arrows whistled around their ears. Many buried themselves harmlessly in the ground, but one found its mark in Teudiselo's leg, causing

him to collapse in pain. Valerio went to his aid and fortunately the Visigoth was quick to cover both of them with his shield, just in time to stop another two darts. Flavius threw Hernando to the ground and ordered the others to get down, too. The frightened horses scattered into the nearby scrub. The six companions knelt together and formed a kind of testudo. More arrows were fired at them, but none penetrated this defence.

Then the real battle began. A score of shadowy figures, with leather body armour, turbans and long black cloaks ran at them from both sides. Liuva drew his broadsword and closed with two of them, wounding one in the neck, the other in the ribcage. Then he took on another four who tried to surround him, brandishing their scimitars. Hernando grasped his sword and leapt in front of Valerio, swiping energetically at all-comers. He wounded three of his opponents, but took a couple of blows to his leather helmet, which sliced through his crow's feathers and left him momentarily dazed.

Fruela tried to escape but was pursued by a tall warrior who unsheathed his scimitar and brought it down heavily on Fruela's small shield. The boy was paralysed by the crushing blow, which deadened his right forearm, and was about to drop his shield and run. But he changed his mind, parried another blow and, instinctively thrusting his sword arm into the darkness, heard his opponent cry out. The blade had found a way in under his attacker's body protection and penetrated his belly. The man staggered and collapsed on the ground in a bloody heap. Fruela was shocked. He had succeeded, almost by magic, in killing a Saracen. In a state of nervous excitement, he hurled himself at another two opponents as they prepared to attack Teudiselo, who was still down on the ground. Getting into a rapid rhythm, he dodged their sword strokes, gave one a cut on the right arm and struck the other on the neck, before finishing him off.

Meanwhile, five Saracens had launched an attack on Flavius, who disabled three with his javelin and ran the others through with his sword. He then hurled his javelin at another man, who was running to attack Hernando from behind. The man fell, struck between the shoulder blades, before he could do any harm. The Judge thanked the Roman with a nod, then got down to business with the four remaining Saracens, flanked by Liuva and Fruela. Shoulder to shoulder they fought, three against four, until Liuva managed to gain an advantage and struck off the head of their leading opponent with a single blow, getting drenched in the spurting blood. The headless corpse fell back with a thud. The next instant, Hernando

thrust his sword into the groin of the second man, then planted the point of his weapon in the back of the third as he turned to flee. The last of them received the full force of Fruela's javelin in his face, staggered and fell.

Fifteen badly wounded men were left lying on the ground, groaning in their own language and crying out for mercy. Flavius gave the order to finish them off, but Valerio objected. The guide angrily overrode him: "If we don't do it now, we'll soon have others on our trail", he shouted and began running them through the heart with his *pilum* one by one.

Liuva followed suit with his broadsword, but Hernando and Fruela had no stomach for the task. Soon all lay dead. Profoundly disturbed by the sight of the twitching bodies and pervading stench of blood, Valerio closed his eyes and prayed for the day when men would no longer cut one another to pieces.

When he opened them again, relief swept over him at the sight of his companions. He thanked God for sparing them and bent to the task of dealing with Teudiselo's injury. The Visigoth was bleeding profusely, with the arrow still planted in his right calf, and could not put his foot down. Valerio gave him plenty of wine to drink, asked Liuva to hold a lighted torch over them and placed a piece of rope between Teudiselo's teeth, advising him to bite tightly. He then took his surgeon's instrument case from his bag and spread a square of linen under the wounded leg. On the cloth, he laid out a scalpel, two hooks, a pair of tweezers and a needle threaded with some black gut.

The preparations over, he spoke some words of encouragement to Teudiselo, grasped the arrow and, with a sharp tug, plucked it from the calf muscle. The Visigoth groaned, but kept his teeth clenched on the piece of rope. Reassuring him that the worst was over, Valerio gently parted the edges of the wound with the two hooks and washed it out. Then he slowly sewed up the opening, pulling the needle through with the tweezers. Teudiselo watched him, bearing the pain in silence. The monk then unrolled a bandage and, having soaked it in vinegar and onion juice, bound up Teudiselo's leg. To complete the treatment, he tied a piece of alexandrite round the patient's neck.

The Visigoth gave a sigh of relief and everyone congratulated the monk. Not even Hernando could withhold his admiration.

"What a great chap, this monk of ours! I'd never have imagined he was such a skilled surgeon!"

"Nor would I have imagined, Count Del Valle, that you were such a nifty fighter!", replied Valerio, deliberately addressing him as an equal.

"We all excelled ourselves, even young Fruela!", added the Judge, pretending not to notice the monk's little dig.

The others were still coping with the emotion of having survived the ambush, so Hernando proposed they drink a toast with the remaining wine.

"Death to that bunch of rabid African dogs!", he said.

The others laughed, raised their flasks and drank together. Then they sat by the roadside and ate some of their provisions. But it still took a lot of laughter and joking before their nerves stopped jangling.

Then Flavius got up, took the torch from Liuva and examined the dead bodies.

"Syrians . . .", he commented. "You can tell from their daggers. That kind is made only in Damascus". Hernando thought for a moment then asked: "Could it be they have already taken Palencia?".

Flavius was doubtful. "No, this lot are only scouts. You can tell from their light equipment. But we must make ourselves scarce. Their horses will have returned the way they came. If we don't hurry, we shall be surprised by the main body of the army. Let's be on our way!"

The six companions recovered their horses, which were waiting meekly among the neighbouring trees. Teudiselo seemed a lot better; the colour had returned to his cheeks. His brother helped him to mount and they set off at a fast pace. Three hours later, they came across the remains of an old Roman settlement. The roofs of the houses had fallen in and the walls were cracked and crumbling. Grass and brambles had reclaimed their own. The only thing that stood out sharp and clear in the moonlight was a small circular temple with tall columns.

"Where are we?", Hernando asked Flavius, who had slowed his pace.

"This is all that is left of Villa Tolita . . . I'm told that centuries ago it was a busy staging post for travellers between Toledo and Legio . . . That must be the Temple of Bacchus, and there must have been plenty of hostelries . . . Then they built a new road farther to the east, the Via Larga, the main route from Gigia to Sevilla, and people deserted this place", explained their guide. "But come, the Pisoraca is now very near!".

Having passed those decaying ruins and ridden another mile through evil-smelling thickets, they finally came to the bank of the river they were seeking and forded its dark eddying waters at a spot known to Flavius. On

they went, mile after mile, through tangles of shrubs and brambles and vast areas of silver-sanded dunes. Not until rosy-fingered dawn began to claim the sky did they come to another river, wider this time with slow-gliding waters. Already the air was warm, and the horses were bathed in sweat.

Flavius ordered a halt. "Here we are. This is the Duero. Let's water our horses, then follow me. Near here are the stone quarries of *Sanctus Stephanus* and some caves where we can rest up until tonight. If all goes well, we shall be in Toledo next day."

So saying, and after they had paused briefly to quench the thirst of the horses, he led them up a nearby hill and into a tunnel close to the summit. No one would find them there. They carefully concealed the horses and, having consumed some of their provisions, fell into a deep sleep.

As he slept, Hernando dreamed a dream. He saw Goswinta, robed in the most intense light, more serene and beautiful than he had ever seen her in life. She took his hand and showed him the gate of a lofty, vine-clad fortress, over which ruled a magnificent winged lion, red in colour, with flames of fire issuing from his mouth. Goswinta left him, dazed and broken-hearted, after speaking the words: *Be on your guard against the false son of David*! The meaning of her warning escaped him, but he kept in his heart the image of the woman he had loved so dearly. Nor did he understand the significance of the fortress and the lion. With sadness, he realised it had been no more than a dream.

He saw Fruela and Flavius, still sleeping alongside the Visigoth brothers, but Valerio was already awake and staring at him.

"Hernando . . . !", he whispered. "Did you dream of a lion?"

The Judge looked at him in amazement. "How did you know?"

But Valerio did not have time to reply. Flavius was already awake and about to rouse the others. The monk did not enlarge and Hernando did not insist. Their guide donned his breastplate and helped the others to gather up the saddlebags and saddle the horses.

"Don't lose heart. We are about to tackle some real mountains, but I give you my word that tomorrow morning you will see the bastions of the former capital of this kingdom!", he said.

Liuva and Teudiselo exchanged melancholy looks, but the words the Roman had spoken betrayed an even older nostalgia.

The sun had already set when they made out on the horizon to the left a long, regular structure pierced with voids and ghostly shadows—the arches of an ancient aqueduct.

"Segovia!", cried Flavius, without slowing his pace, pointing to the majestic construction raised by his ancestors. They soon came to a fork in the road. The guide took the right-hand route and spurred his horse, urging his companions to do likewise.

"This is the most exposed part of our journey", he said, raising his voice to ensure he was heard by Hernando, whose horse was away to his right.

"And therefore the most dangerous", replied the Judge, well aware that they needed to get out of the area as quickly as possible.

A little later, Flavius slowed slightly and, almost flattening himself on the horse's back, branched off into a well-concealed opening on the right-hand side of the road. The other five imitated him, following their guide along a narrow, overgrown pathway across the fields. They continued by this route for several miles until enormous dark shapes began to rise up before them: the mountains of the Sierra Grande.

The track quickly became steeper and the horses slackened their pace, the breath coming and going noisily in their nostrils. Flavius repeatedly dug his heals into the sides of his mount and, holding his torch aloft, encouraged the others to maintain their momentum. His companions were all tired out and thirsty, but they followed him up the slope, alternately tugging on the reins and releasing them. There were some lofty trees at this altitude, black pines whose lower branches lashed their helmets and faces. But no one reacted. In silence they followed their Roman guide, whose imposing armour reflected the light of the flaming torch. They continued in this way, scrambling along one after the other on what had become a rocky, winding pathway, slowing for the hairpin bends and picking up speed along the short straight stretches.

Now and again they had to negotiate landslides, heaps of stones or trees uprooted by storms. The heat they had experienced when crossing the lands around Palencia was now but a memory. The temperature had dropped and the icy air penetrated the rings of their chain mail like invisible needles. But nothing could stop them. They passed through areas of woodland and jumped the crevasses that opened up before them in the torchlight, until around the eighth hour of the night they came to a cliff, with nothing visible before them except a starry sky.

Here Flavius allowed them to stop and rest.

"Well, chaps, this is the Bear Pass. Now, put out the torches and follow me on foot."

The others did as they were bid and gathered in a group behind him. The guide led them to the cliff edge to show them the Meseta.

"Toledo is not far away. It's down there, on the River Tagus. We should reach it by dawn. We're still too far away to see the lights . . .", Flavius was explaining, when suddenly, on the slope of the mountain to their right, he noticed a fiery streak advancing like a giant millipede.

"What's that?", asked Valerio.

Flavius did not reply. He had never seen anything like it. Hernando arrived next, followed by Liuva, with Teudiselo leaning on his shoulder, tired but at least rested from the wound of the previous night. Fruela came up last, having always brought up the rearguard, and let out a yelp of fright: "Saracens! Look, it must be them!".

Flavius told him to be quiet and silently they watched what was happening in the valley below them. There were several thousand infantry, clad in dark tunics, possibly blue, and loose light-coloured cloaks. But there were also squadrons of cavalry mounted on small, fleet-footed horses. The riders wore darker uniforms and crescent-moon helmets. Gradually they came more sharply into focus.

The infantry were mostly dressed in dark blue, but they were preceded by others in green, immediately behind their officers, who showed up completely white in the light of the torches. As the marching figures approached their side of the mountain, they could hear the roll of drums and chanting. A *rah, rah, rah* rose from their compact ranks, as they brought their boot heels down in unison. Some seemed to be singing old hymns, maybe Libyan or Syrian, others more likely Numidian. Then came the sound of brass instruments: Oooonnnn! Oooonnnn!, from the long convoluted tubas some were carrying on their shoulders. There was also the trumpeting of elephants, at least a hundred of them, all protected by leather body armour, with metal head and trunk protectors which left only their eyes visible.

The thud of marching feet was now very close and Flavius ordered them to crouch behind a large rock, from which they could see without being seen. They were awed by the size of this army about to cross the pass and make its way down to Segovia, and probably on to Palencia.

"There is no end of them", said Hernando. "We'll never prevail!"

"That's not why we are here, Count Del Valle. We have another mission", pointed out Teudiselo.

"Teudiselo is right. Toledo is our objective, and we shall be there before dawn, but there is something else I have noticed", added Flavius, who had the best view from their point of vantage.

"What are you referring to, Roman?", asked the Judge.

"Look down there, near the armoured elephants and the Berber advance guard dressed in blue. Can you see?"

Hernando recognised the figure of a man on foot, wearing light armour over a heavy purple tunic studded with jewels. On his head, he wore a hexagonal skullcap, also richly adorned. His features were barely visible, but his face was of Mediterranean type, smooth and beardless in the torchlight.

"Who is that man?", he asked.

"He's a Byzantine. I can tell from his clothing and bearing", said Valerio.

And he was quite right. They had glimpsed Julian of Ceuta, Tariq's ally, but how were they to know?

Valerio fell silent and began to pray. For him the encounter was a bad sign.

The six rested a while in a cavern in the cliff and, shortly before morning, set off again. They stopped a few miles from Toledo, at a village known to Flavius. Here they rested until sunset. They were wakened by two shapely Hispano-Roman girls, who brought them tubs of hot water and some peasant clothing. Then, still only half awake, they were taken to a circular room with a wood fire burning, where a table was set out with plates of bread, olives and garum sauce, and three pot-bellied amphorae of wine full to the brim. Here the village chief, a mild man with a gentle smile, spoke with Flavius. The latter introduced him to the Judge, who cautiously shook his hand.

"This is Venerio, the father of this fine family", Flavius reassured him. "We have been acquainted for years. His brother, Marco, was with me at the scouting school in Legio, same *centuria*, same dormitory!".

At this, the Judge relaxed a little and unrolled on the table the map he had been given by Monofonso. Flavius watched without much interest and was reluctant to accept advice.

"In my opinion," said the Roman, "it would be better if I accompany you to the rabbi's house. I don't know him personally, but I do know he is a very powerful man and lives in the synagogue. It is a quiet area, with

no street lighting. We shall have to avoid the Saracen palisade, which they have already erected to the north, in front of the old Visigoth defences. Then we had better slip round behind the ruins of the Roman circus and the church of St. Leocadia, and cross the section of the old Visigoth wall that has not yet been surrounded by the new barrier. That's right here", he said, indicating a point on the map marked by a castle symbol. "This is the Jews' fort. If we can get round it, we shall be at the synagogue in no time, and without being seen in the dark".

Hernando listened somewhat impatiently, but made no objection. He simply nodded his agreement and looked questioningly at the Visigoth brothers. They, too, approved the plan. Then Flavius suggested that Valerio and Fruela remain with his friends in the village.

"It's a dangerous mission. I don't want to risk the lives of a monk and a young lad", he explained.

Finally, he turned to the Judge: "We'll leave immediately after supper. I'll accompany you to the threshold of the synagogue, then I'll come back here. It's better you manage by yourselves. There are too many people who know me there in town. I might be recognised and that would ruin the whole plan. You have Petro's best men. Avoid trouble and keep your wits about you. Here, we're just a few miles from the Porta Cesaraugusta. We'll be waiting for you there at noon tomorrow, disguised like you, among the market stalls."

So they were to go it alone: one Cantabrian, or rather one Autrigonian, and two Visigoths. The fate of the boy with the Ruby Cross was in the hands of his father and the two brothers sent by his uncle.

CHAPTER XVIII

TOLEDO

The three companions followed their guide as far as the walls of the old Roman circus, time-ravaged but still impressive. Flavius imagined the gladiatorial games that for centuries had taken place there, watched by crowds from all over Hispania. Now the place was peopled only by ghosts. They quickly crossed some uncultivated fields to the right of the circus and took a path leading to the church of St. Leocadia. Nobody was out and about. The night air was balmy, but the sky was covered in clouds which blotted out the moon. They had to trust to Flavius's instinct and memory. Fortunately he knew the area intimately.

Soon they noticed a row of torches set along the parapet of a tall fence: the new Saracen palisade. On the walkway, they could just make out the turbaned figures of soldiers doing their rounds. Ducking low behind a hedge, they slipped round to the rear of the old church, a simple construction with a small square door surmounted by a rose window. They ran alongside the wall of the building, crossed the square in front of it, then disappeared into a maze of narrow lanes serving a suburb of low wooden houses.

Again, no one. Emerging close to the continuation of the Saracen palisade to the east of the city, they clambered stealthily down to the right bank of the Tagus. Here, with the water up to their knees, they made their way along under the root-knotty river bank, holding their swords and shields above their heads and taking care not to lose their footing on the loose gravel. They clambered up again a little further on and found themselves under the old Visigothic walls. Flavius led them through a narrow breach in the defences and so they finally entered the city proper. The night was pitch black and all they could make out was a semi-cylindrical mass, tall, dark and menacing: the Jewish fort. They advanced slowly along the walls of the building, passing some tall cypresses and finally, after threading their way through the old Jewish quarter, came to the bottom of a sloping street. Before them was an enormous wooden door and, carved on its leaves, two large stars of David. They had arrived.

Flavius stopped, shook hands with them and banged the brass ring of the door-knocker, located on the right-hand leaf, near the *mězuzah*.

"Good luck!", he said. "Until tomorrow at noon", and made off by the same route they had come.

The other three stood waiting. After a little while the door opened and the synagogue administrator appeared, a tall, very thin man with a wrinkled face, pale eyes and straw-coloured hair. He was carrying a lantern in his right hand.

"Who are you?", he asked in a leaden voice. Hernando handed him the message he had been given by Monofonso. The other cast an eye over it in the light of his lantern.

"Good, follow me!", he said, and led them into the synagogue itself.

They passed along a narrow corridor with a mosaic pavement, and through a second door into the sanctuary. Here they crossed the five aisles, separated by four rows of octagonal columns supporting horseshoe arches on capitals carved with floral decoration. At the back, by the eastern wall, stood a black wooden platform and behind it, lit by seven-branched candlesticks, the ark containing the rolls of the Torah. Their guide motioned to them to make haste and refrain from talking as they passed in front of the *gěnizah*. This was lined with shelves holding old, dog-eared volumes covered in dust. At the end of the room was a small door with a pointed arch. The door was ajar and they could just discern a greenish light coming from the space beyond. The administrator knocked on the door and a hoarse voice responded in Aramaic. The official asked them to wait and went into the room. There was a hurried confabulation, then the tall thin Jew re-emerged and invited the three to go in. With this, he left them.

The room was enormous, six-sided, with a musty smell. The high yellow walls were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, loaded with volumes, tomes, rolls and parchment notebooks of every imaginable shape and size. In the middle was a large beech-wood counter, also covered with books and parchments. At one end stood an enormous, seven-branched candlestick, casting light on an old man dressed in white who was leaning over a lectern. He raised his eyes, two piercing dots in a curiously shaped face reminiscent of a wild boar.

"So, you have come at last, knights of the Asturias!", he exclaimed, with a rictus that revealed a pair of long, curved eye-teeth.

"Are you Rabbi Kupraman?", asked Hernando.

"Indeed I am! And what about you? Hernando, if I am not mistaken. And your companions, who are they?", asked the hairy-faced rabbi.

"These are the men appointed to escort me, Liuva and Teudiselo", replied the Judge.

"My compliments on your fine armour, brave knights", commented the other, inviting them to come forward. "Please, take a seat at this humble table and let me offer you a drop of my lemon liqueur", he continued, getting up and busying himself around a nearby trolley on which were a number of glass jugs and pitchers. Having selected an oblong, purple-coloured bottle, he poured the liquid into goblets and served it to the knights. Hernando showed signs of hesitation.

"Drink up, drink up, my brave fellows! After your long journey, you must be parched", he insisted.

The three of them raised the goblets to their lips. Hernando pretended to sip the liquid, out of politeness, but barely touched it. The other two, however, especially Teudiselo, downed the contents in one long draught.

The rabbi looked on with satisfaction and refilled their glasses. Then he began speaking slowly, in the light of the candlestick:

"You arrived just as I was reading the latest letters from Constantinople, my native city, which I left many years ago, when I was but twenty, after the death of the Emperor Heraclius. There is news of this new emperor, Anastasio, who has sent a mission to Damascus to discover the intentions of Caliph Walid's Saracens. But tell me! Do they really think that, in Constantinople, they will be able to stop these new initiatives? No! No one will be able to stop them. It's quite clear from what I see here: the Berbers of Ziyad's son Tariq and the Arabs commanded by Emir Musa, son of Nusayr, are warriors accustomed to fighting from the cradle, and ready to die for the god of their Prophet Mohammed! They have occupied almost the whole of Hispania in just three years; in ten they will be on the coast of Friesland, or in Rome itself!"

The three companions were not amused by these prophecies. The Visigoth brothers made as if to rise from their stools, but were unable to articulate any form of protest. Their senses were dulled and their minds clouded. Only Hernando still seemed to have his wits about him.

"What's that, Rabbi? You believe what it says in your letters from the East? I swear that they won't get past us; we shall stop them before they come in sight of Mons Vindius!"

The man with the boar's face scrutinised him with a sinister light in his eye.

"Really? Will you be able to stop thousands of well-armed men—ten thousand, they say—relying on a few hundred peasants armed with sickles and straw sombreros? Don't make me laugh. You must be a great dreamer, dear Hernando, of the kind Hispania produces at regular intervals, ever since the revolt of the Bautian peasants! Or are you joking?"

The Judge turned purple with rage, but did not want to breach the rules of hospitality. He merely said: "We are here to discover the whereabouts of my son Toribio. We believe him to be a prisoner of the Tariq you mentioned and we want to know how to set him free. How much money do you want, Rabbi?", he asked scornfully.

The other looked at him, apparently amused, but preferred not to reply at once. Instead, he offered them more of the lemon liqueur from the purple-coloured carafe. Liuva and Teudiselo did not hold back, but Hernando flatly refused.

"No, thank you. I drank before coming here. Tell me then: how much do you want?", he asked, planting his left elbow on the table and looking the other straight in the eye.

Kupraman smiled with a slight tremble of the lips. "A thousand gold pieces, and I'll tell you where to find your son!"

"Ye gods! Do you take me for a king? Where would I ever find so much money?", spat out the Judge, rising to his feet in anger.

"Calm down, calm down, Hernando, and listen! I have heard that your son was carrying a valuable cross, do you know anything about it?"

The blood drained from the Judge's face.

"What do you know about it? Who told you?", he questioned.

"That's something I can't say, even for a hundred thousand gold pieces. But there is something you could do . . .", replied the other, the skin on his face taking on a strange scaly green appearance.

"What do you want from me?", enquired the Judge, now convinced that Kupraman might at least tell him where to find Toribio.

"I can't tell you how, but if you tell me where the cross is, I can use it to free your son!", whispered the Rabbi slowly. Then, after a pause that seemed to go on forever, he added: "If we are still in time."

From this remark, Hernando understood that Kupraman had already seen Toribio and must have tried to extort from him the truth about the Ruby Cross.

"Cursed Jew! So you are on the side of those devils, are you?"

Only then did Kupraman realise that the Autrigonian was more awake than he should have been. Clearly he had not drunk enough the first time his goblet was filled.

"So this is a trap, you monster! You have fed poison to my companions and now you are trying to corrupt me!" yelled Hernando, and put his hand to the hilt of his sword, which was concealed under his jacket.

At this point, the door was thrown open and twenty Saracen guards burst in. They surrounded their victims and three of them attacked the Count of Valle de Autrigonia. Hernando struggled, but was eventually struck with a mace on the back of the neck and collapsed like an empty sack, ending up among the piles of books on the floor.

Kupraman ordered the Berbers to take him away:

"Tell Tariq I did my best, but without success. They have said nothing about the defence of the Asturias, nor of Cantabria. Have them tortured or kill them. I'm sorry, but like this they are no use to anyone", snarled the boar-faced Rabbi, whose skin was now as scaly and slimy as that of a serpent, his eyes burning with the ferocity of a wild animal. The Saracens departed immediately, bearing the three companions bodily to the prison on Al Hizam hill.

After they had gone, Kupraman called the synagogue administrator and invited him to share a drink. Unwittingly, the latter agreed, but his vision soon clouded over. He began to suspect that Kupraman was not the real Rabbi, but by then it was too late. Two enormous teeth, sharp as sabres, were boring into his carotid arteries.

CHAPTER XIX

IN MUNUZA'S HAREM

Agasinda awoke on a soft goose-down mattress. She was lying between red silk sheets, surrounded by white and sky-blue cushions. Her eyes came to rest on the long tapering canes forming the roof of the canopy above her head, then on the hemp curtains hanging from it, blocking her view of the rest of the room. Through the coarse material she felt a breath of warm air caress her body, causing her tense breasts and belly to relax, her legs to float weightless on the bed. She was in a state of ecstasy, delighting in the soft delicate notes of a distant lyre and the rhythmic beat of high-pitched drums, alternating with the tinkling of metallic percussion instruments.

Lulled by these sounds, she smilingly parted the curtains and was intrigued to see other beds and canopies similar to hers. Lying on them were other women and girls, some even younger than herself, their graceful, naked bodies describing slow serpentine movements or shaking like palm fronds in the wind. In features, the girls were of various types: Oriental, African, some smiling and laughing, others calling out to one another, disporting themselves in different poses.

As she surveyed this joyous scene, she became aware of the warmth of a hand caressing her belly. Enjoying the sensation, she turned her head and saw an ivory-skinned woman with large oval green eyes leaning over her. She shut her eyes for a long languorous moment. When she opened them again, the woman with the green eyes was gone. She was alone on the bed. But she certainly did not feel alone. It was as if she were part of a great love scene, in which each participant basked in the flux of feeling and excitement of all the others.

She heard a light footfall approaching. The curtains parted again and a dark-skinned man appeared. He had a slightly pear-shaped face, a slender nose and fine straight hair with a few streaks of white falling over his forehead. He was wearing an indigo-coloured tunic and a necklace of coral and pearls. The man observed her intently with his pitch-black eyes. As he smiled, his sensuous lips parted to show a set of fine white teeth.

He removed his tunic, revealing a well-muscled body that would have done honour to an athlete. His pectoral muscles were well defined, his abdominals firm and taut as the strings of a harpsichord. The girl moved instinctively towards him, eager to caress so attractive and harmonious a body. But at that instant there came a loud whoosh, followed by a heavy thud that shook the frame of the canopy.

A giant arrow, fired from a ballista, had buried itself in the wall a few feet from the man's head. It was followed almost immediately by cries of horror and dismay. The girls jumped off their beds and ran towards the door of the vast room. The man cursed as he hurried to dress. Agasinda seemed to awake from a long period of torpor. Her memory was restored in a flash. She was shocked to find herself naked. Her heart raced, she struggled for breath, her stomach contracted. She cried out in panic, desperately looking for her clothes but unable to find them. The woman with the green eyes reappeared and threw her a red silk dressing gown. The man had disappeared.

Agasinda jumped down from the bed and followed the woman to the door. They were in a long wide entrance hall leading to a spacious terrace. The other harem women had gathered there, swathed in their veils, to see what was happening. Agasinda looked out over the stone parapet. Before her she saw only the endless waves of the sea.

"Down there! They're down there!", shouted the woman with the green eyes.

Following her pointing finger, Agasinda made them out clearly: a few yards beyond the ditch protecting the castle were hundreds of men. Many were wearing metal armour, which flashed in the sun, but most were dressed in short tunics, shirts and leather jackets, with only straw hats for head covering. They were armed with bows, swords, axes and javelins. And there were also a number of ballistae, which some country lads were in the act of loading.

The castle soon came to life, with guards and soldiers running in all directions. A squad of archers took up position on the levels above the terrace occupied by Agasinda and the girls. Others appeared at the three rows of arched windows of the bastion beside them. They could hear the cursing of the men straining to close the gates and raise the drawbridge. The sound of the chains was accompanied by the barked orders of the Berber captains. Meanwhile, other soldiers armed with lances and scimitars lined up behind the parapet of their terrace, ordering the girls to return to the

harem. But Agasinda was determined to remain for a moment longer. She had noticed the young man with the wolf skin across his chest who was commanding the other men-at-arms and peasant lads. His long hair flowed out behind him and he had a fawn-like face like hers.

"Who can that be?", asked Nurbanu, the girl with the green eyes who had lain with her on her bed. Agasinda was not familiar with the Berber language, but she understood that she too had noticed the young man with the unusually proud face and bearing.

"That is Fafila, my brother!", she replied, overcome with pride and enthusiasm.

The nightmare seemed to be coming to an end. Nurbanu gazed at her in fear and ran off shouting. Agasinda was carried away bodily by a soldier, who bundled her up in his white cloak and deposited her in the harem corridor. She would have liked to remain on the terrace, but it was impossible. All she had on was the cloak over her dressing-gown, and no weapon. The sky was darkened by showers of arrows. She could hear the clatter of lances and javelins smashing on the stonework of the terraces. Then the distressed cries and sobbing of those who had been wounded. Agasinda saw a Berber who had taken an arrow in the chest collapse quite near her, then two others with darts in the neck and stomach. Not many of the Berbers had chest armour; some were even naked to the waist. They had not been expecting the attack. There was no question of them fighting a pitched battle. Then the walls began to shake under the impact of stone balls thrown by catapults. The girl understood that she must take cover immediately.

The attack lasted many hours. Fafila's hundred Visigoths had brought with them many young men from the Cilurnigian tribe, which had been decimated when Xixon was taken. Most of them were young lads whose fathers and brothers had been massacred by Munuza's Berbers. Anger and a lust for revenge convulsed their faces and made them indomitable. They never stopped, not even for a gulp of water or wine, continuing to hurl javelins and loose arrows at the terraces of the fortress. Meanwhile, the Visigoths had brought up wooden siege ladders and were heaving them into position against the walls.

The fighting intensified along the battlements, where the Berbers had great difficulty in repulsing the soldiers who sprang at them. Many, it is true, were killed before they could engage in hand-to-hand combat,

hit by the arrows of archers protected behind the slits of the bastion, or stunned and thrown back into the void by the defenders of the parapet. But some managed to scale the walls and engage with the enemy on their own ground, jabbing and slashing with their swords or smashing heads and limbs with their axes. The sun was only just setting and already the terraces were bathed in blood and strewn with the mutilated bodies of the dying, severed heads and abandoned weapons.

Munuza followed developments from the tower raised above the buildings of his harem. From this point of vantage, he gave orders to the archer captains and the engineers working the catapults and ballistae. When a squad of Visigoths managed to clear the terrace below, he gave orders to the archers to aim at their collar bones, the parts of the bodies protected only by chain mail. Their first volley killed at least twenty. But Fafila was not discouraged. From his own ballista position beyond the ditch, he urged the remainder of the Cilurginian peasant lads to press home the attack. They quickly scaled the ladders and dropped behind the battlements, trying to exploit the initial success of the Visigoth soldiers who had gone before them.

But though there were several dozen of them, the lads were not trained in hand-to-hand combat. They soon began to fall under the more skilful and deadly play of the Berber scimitars. In less than an hour, the enemy had regained control of the terraces and all the ladders had been thrown back into the ditch. The ground before the eastern walls was strewn with the corpses of soldiers, peasants and men-at-arms. The sun was setting and Fafila tried desperately to take advantage of the last minutes of natural light to unleash an attack on the bastion guarding the drawbridge, having brought up another hundred of his peasant lads.

But just as he himself was running towards the ditch with a long ladder, intending to cross it and scale the wall, he was halted by the shouts of a youngster telling him to look out to sea. A powerful fleet of ships, thousands of dromonds and barges, was approaching the harbour.

"We've no chance now!", yelled one of his Visigoth lieutenants.

Fafila stood stock still, surveying the wide bay covered by the green triangular sails of the Saracen fleet, as the wind ruffled his fringe of hair and arrows and javelins whistled past his ears.

"Damn you!", he murmured with hatred in his eyes", ". . . but we shall be back!".

So saying, he ordered his men to withdraw from the edge of the ditch and retire to no man's land. The few surviving men-at-arms and peasants scrambled back to the Asturian defences and the gates closed behind them. The siege had failed.

Fafila was not at peace. He thought he had seen his sister on those terraces. He had better make his way back to Cangas de Onis and await his father's return. Maybe he was foolish to have let his thirst for revenge so consume him. This was war, and he needed to consider his tactics more carefully.

CHAPTER XX

TARIQ IBN ZIYAD

When Hernando opened his eyes, he was in a dark, stifling cell. His vision was still obscured by the clots of blood that had formed on his eyelids, but he could nevertheless make out the cords that were biting into his ankles and wrists. He was lying on a palliasse beside a wall of blackened marble. The air stank of excrement and urine. Gradually his vision cleared. He was in a kind of cavern with a very high ceiling. A beam of light was coming through the grating of a small oval window, just below ceiling level, pinkish in colour, suggesting the dawn.

As he watched motes of dust swimming in the cone of light, the pervading silence was broken by a groan from close by. The Judge shook his head and tried to focus his gaze. In a corner of the chamber, he made out the green and white shape of a figure with familiar features, suspended from the wall in front of him like Christ on the cross. It was a tall young man with blond hair and good-natured face, wearing a silver circlet sullied with blood and dust. His only begotten son! It had happened just as he had feared. Valerio's dream had come true.

"Toribio, Toribio . . . my boy, can you hear me?", he said in a voice broken with emotion.

The shape raised itself slightly in response to the question.

"Father . . . Have you come at last?"

Hernando felt as if his heart were gripped in a vice. This was the state to which they had reduced his one and only son. Those raving devils were to blame . . . but so was he with his overweening ambition.

"Father, forgive me!", murmured Toribio feverishly, his breathing coming like a broken bellows.

"And what do I need to forgive you for, my son?"

"I've lost it. I've lost it . . .", replied the inert form on the wall, his tears, like pearls, reflecting the light from the window.

"What have you lost, my dear one?", asked the old man with unwonted gentleness.

"The cross . . . the Ruby . . . I've no longer got it . . .", replied the other, his sobs coming in irregular bursts. "It's my fault . . . I sinned . . . I have done what I ought not to have done . . . And the Lord has taken it from me . . ."

"It's better if you have lost it . . . At least they won't be able to find it!", his father tried to console him.

But Toribio was not at peace.

"I have sinned. I did something I should never have done . . . !"

Hernando struggled to draw closer, crawling a couple of yards on the filthy, mould-encrusted pavement. "Tell me, Toribio, what happened exactly?"

Slowly and with many pauses, his son told him what had happened at Santa Maria de Monsacri, how he and Agasinda had been kidnapped, the interrogations and tortures he had suffered. His father became increasingly agitated as the horrors unfolded, but he listened without interrupting. At last Toribio finished his account, dissolving into tears.

"Don't cry, Toribio? You did your duty, didn't you? Surely you don't think you could have managed on your own, or with that ridiculous handful of boys, against ten hardened Arab warriors?"

His son did not reply, which seemed strange to his father. Then suddenly Hernando remembered his son's liking for Agasinda.

"Are you sure you have told me everything?", he asked.

Toribio's sobs redoubled.

"No! But maybe I had better do so . . . then you'll understand why I have been punished!", he said and, even more slowly, began relating what had happened at the church of the Angels of Love.

Again his father listened in silence but, when the story came to an end, he was not greatly shocked. After all, he too had made love with Toribio's mother before they were married. And he had known for a long time that Toribio and Agasinda were in love. So, partly out of tenderness at so innocent a confession, partly from pride, especially now he had been elevated to the nobility, Hernando was not in the least disturbed by this addendum to Toribio's story. On the contrary. In a way, their love for each other was good news for him. But the mystery remained unresolved. The cross had disappeared into thin air. Valerio's dream had been a perfectly accurate revelation. The demons really existed. That accursed Astasio was their commander, and it was certain they had allies everywhere. So what was really happening in the spirit realm?

This should have been no more than a war against an enemy invader. An enemy with a totally different faith, to be sure, but still a straightforward enemy, like the many who had ravaged the lands of Hispania over the centuries. The Romans, the Vandals, the Goths, the Alans and the Swabians had all had completely different religions and customs. So what was the difference? But a difference there certainly was. And now Hernando could see it clearly. This was no longer a question of armed clashes between enemies more or less alien to one another, but a conflict between forces transcending the purely human. A parallel struggle was going on, which only occasionally coincided with earthly events. And when this happened, it seemed to have some precise purpose. Hernando suddenly remembered the words of St. Jacobus. Then he searched for his son's eyes in the darkness. A ray of light fell upon them: they were deep set and swollen with tears, fixing him with a questioning expression.

It was the turn of the Judge to begin sobbing.

"No, Toribio, no . . . It's not you who should be asking forgiveness from me, but I who should be thinking more about the reasons for my actions . . . this God . . . I don't know . . . I am so confused . . ."

Toribio heard the words and felt an immense warmth pervade his chest. Strength suddenly seemed to flow back and blood return from the congested veins of his tortured legs, paralysed by the fetters set into the wall.

"Father, father! Don't be discouraged! We'll do it. I'm sure of it now!", said the boy, as if his father's sobs gave advance notice of an impending conversion.

But Hernando was increasingly discouraged. He told Toribio what had happened after they had parted: the cancellation of Fafila's wedding, the meeting with Flavius, the journey to Toledo, the encounter with Kupraman. His son listened attentively, amazed by how much had happened in less than a fortnight. For the most part, these were ugly and easily predictable developments, now that the devil's strategy was increasingly clear, but there was also some good news.

"Fruela is alive, then?", he asked happily.

"He certainly is!", replied his father. "Boobies like him don't die young!"

Toribio found the strength to laugh.

"You're wrong, father!", he said. "I assure you he is stronger than you think, and one day he'll prove it to you."

Hernando did not want to debate his son's opinions on how to train his men. He was sure Toribio was wrong, but this was not the time to correct him. And in any case Toribio did not give him the opportunity.

"And there is something really great you've told me amongst all these disasters!", he continued.

"And what's that?", asked his father, amazed that his son found some cause for rejoicing in such a tale of woe.

"You are a count!", replied his son, with obvious satisfaction.

Hernando smiled at his simplicity. His son obviously thought the new title must be a source of immense pleasure to him. He could not imagine that Hernando might no longer be so sure, and indeed was no longer sure of many other things. But he did not want to dampen such pure and loyal enthusiasm.

"We are counts, my son!", he replied, emphasising the plural. "A title that will be inherited by you and your sons, and your grandchildren after you!"

Toribio felt better. He had managed to restore a little of his father's good humour, so often crushed by the weight of his ambitions. But suddenly an image of the greedy and corrupt Kupraman came into his mind, and with it the unhappy sequence of disastrous events. The cross was lost, maybe forever. Things had taken the worst possible turn.

"Astasio . . . now Kupraman . . . and possibly that Monofonso at San Martín who recommended him to you . . . It will be hard, father, they are everywhere!", murmured Toribio, worry taking over again.

"And you should see the thousands of Saracens we saw crossing the Sierra Grande! They even had elephants with them!", Hernando added.

And as their imaginations ran riot, picturing scenes of the war that was almost certain to break upon their dear ones up there in the mountains, they heard footsteps echoing along the corridor leading to their cell.

The warders flung open the door, blinding them with the light of their torches. In came two jailers followed by a tall, powerfully built man, clothed from head to foot in a thick black tunic. He was wearing a large leather breastplate to which were sewn plates of copper and silver inset with precious stones. He removed the purple silk kerchief covering his face. His features were aristocratic, his skin black, smooth and clear like that of a twenty year old. Only his eyes, horizontal slits on either side of a long snub nose, betrayed the shrewd, experienced character of a man of at least thirty.

"So you are the Cantabrians?", he asked, in Latin, in a strangely quiet and cultivated tone of voice.

Neither father nor son deigned to reply.

"I repeat my question: are you the Cantabrians?", continued the black-garbed figure, with greater emphasis.

"And why should we answer? Who are you?", asked Hernando, stumbling somewhat over the language of Rome.

"You are right. I have not introduced myself. Tariq son of Ziyad! I am the captain general of the Berber armies, in the service of Musa son of Nusayr, Emir of Hispania, and Caliph Al Walid of Damascus. May Allah protect him and protect us all. As for you, I do not even know what God you pray to!"

"Certainly not the one vaunted by your prophet!", replied the Judge, almost interrupting.

The Berber's eyes narrowed even more.

"I would urge you not to vomit blasphemies concerning the name of the Prophet, just as I refrain from insulting the name of your Jesus!", he proclaimed between clenched teeth.

Once again, Toribio was about to run to his impudent father's rescue, but Hernando got his word in first: "We are Christians, as you well know, lord of the Berbers, so why do you ask us?"

Toribio was overcome with joyous surprise at these words, as Tariq slowly and silently observed the emaciated, anguished face of his small but defiant father.

Hernando continued: "I am Hernando, Count of Valle de Autrigonia, and this is my son Toribio . . . whom your men have treated like an animal . . . Shame on you!"

Tariq scrutinised him again, then turned his attention to the young man hanging from the wall.

"Take him down!", he ordered the two warders standing nearby.

They seemed not to understand.

"I told you to take him down! Quick or I'll have you punished!", he demanded again.

The two jailers hurriedly unchained the boy's limbs and deposited his limp body on the pavement. Then Tariq ordered one of them to bring him a drink and continued: "I am sorry they have treated you in this way, but you must understand that my men make no distinction between nobles

and peasants, and I was not informed of your presence here until this morning."

"I suppose that Kupraman sent you here, then?" enquired Hernando.

"That is irrelevant. It is I who command this city and all owe me obedience. Including prisoners such as yourselves!", replied the Berber forcefully, before asking more quietly: "Where do you come from, then?"

"I've just told you. We are Cantabrians, or rather Autrigonians, and I have come here to free my son. And . . . besides . . . what have you done with our escort?"

"If you mean the Goths who were with you, they are still sleeping in the neighbouring cell. But tell me where you come from exactly!", replied Tariq with a note of irritation.

"From hell! That's where we come from, and we hope to take you and all the friends of your prophet there some day soon!", was the explosive reply of the newly appointed count from the North.

Tariq broke into unexpected laughter. Then he approached Hernando and bent over him. His features were even more pronounced in this position and his eyes bored into Hernando from a couple of feet away.

"I don't know if your God appreciates bad manners, but Allah certainly doesn't! I will therefore be patient with you until you are courteous enough to answer me, but . . . to begin with . . . where I come from people who live in glass houses do not throw stones!", said the Berber general, his eyes flashing.

"And why should we be so submissive? You are not on your own territory. We did not invite you here, and our people hate you for what you have done. You won't last another ten moons!", replied the Judge, unconsciously trying to model his speech on the more courteous manner of the Berber.

But Tariq only laughed again, albeit with greater restraint.

"Let me tell you that my lieutenants have already dealt with resistance in the Cartagena region and are now on their way to occupy your beloved Cantabria. Seven thousand of them are marching towards Amaya and I myself will be leaving within the hour to join them. Does that satisfy you, respectable Count of the Autrigonians?"

The Judge returned the gaze of the face hovering over him. His face remained immobile, but his brain was hard at work. Of course, that was why they had seen such a large army on the Sierra Grande. Not all of them were heading for the Asturias. Pelayo and his brother-in-law had done well

to doubt the statements of the false bishop. But the numbers were still too great for the Cantabrian forces. They would overwhelm his people in just a few days.

Tariq continued implacably: "And after taking your fine city, and breaking down its walls with my catapults, I shall turn my attention to the Asturias and your friend Pelayo. My troops will overwinter there, together with those of Emir Musa and his son Abd Al Abziz, who has already landed from the sea after subjugating the whole of Galicia. Does that satisfy you now, admirable Count?"

The Judge was tempted to spit in his face.

"A day will come when you long for the peace and quiet of your Mauritanian beaches. This is our land. Go and leave us alone, you bastards!", he growled.

Tariq replied with a smile, which made Hernando explode with anger.

"God sees what you are doing here and will punish you! You will regret it! This war will not be over until you are all in hell!", he thundered.

This time, Tariq was serious: "May Allah have mercy on you, miserable infidel! Because it will soon be you who have to give account, if you continue in your pig-headedness!", declared the Berber, without raising his voice.

Then Toribio took over.

"You speak of your God as if he were the only true God, but you call him by a different name: Allah, you say! But why should there be two gods, I would like to know?"

Tariq was perplexed for a moment, but then the smile returned to his lips.

"Allah is the one true God and there is no other. The error is on your side. You have been blinded by ignorance and superstition, and have confused Allah with one of his prophets. The Prophet spoke clearly. No man on earth can be begotten by Allah like the son of a human couple. Allah cannot mix with the blood of a woman, and his power cannot be subject to the rules of mere mortals. That is a blasphemy. And it is both blasphemous and absurd to believe that a human being can be Allah and his father at one and the same time. How can you be so stupid? And how can you believe that Allah was crucified by the Romans like a common thief? If they had even tried it, he would have annihilated them with the

snap of the fingers. You are both blasphemous and idiotic, you Christians. That is the truth!"

Toribio was not in the least troubled by these words. They were things he had considered in depth when Valerio and Bishop Fruttuoso had taught him the meaning of the Trinity, and when he had learned of the new Arab religion from certain Byzantine and Sicilian monks. To him it was clear that Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit were a single entity, and that God had become man and suffered on the cross to demonstrate that part of him was in us and that we could therefore be saved, if only we really wanted to be. And it was not true that God had joined himself to a woman. Mary's virginity was the proof of it. Jesus had been conceived in the most immaculate, and therefore divine, manner possible. The spirit of the Father and a human spirit could co-exist in him, why not? And this, too, was proof of the omnipotence of God—a God who truly loves is able to live in the spirit of those he loves.

Tariq was merely confirming what he had heard from those monks. The Muslims believed in a god who was external to man. He might be good and omnipotent, as the Christians saw their God, but as distant from man as the gods his father and his ancestors had worshipped all their lives.

"Does your Allah ask you to love your neighbour as you love yourself? ", replied the young man.

"Allah is infinitely great and able to forgive the man who is not faithful to him, provide he says sorry and bows the knee before him. That is all I need to know!", replied the Saracen general, exercising patience in the face of the Christian's questions.

"Well, may God bless him, but . . . he still seems to me like an earthly ruler, like so many others, not one who is able to live in heaven and on earth like Jesus. Do you understand me?", objected the young man.

This time, as far as the Berber was concerned, things just did not add up.

"Your remarks are very clever, but I really don't see what you are driving at", he replied.

Toribio looked at him with gentleness.

"If your Allah cannot be incarnate in a man about to be crucified, how can he assume the right to save us all from Evil? What can he know of the unhappiness and suffering we bear in our mortal bodies?"

Tariq was silent for a moment. He looked at the boy on the stone floor, then his father beside him, then the two jailers.

"I'm not here to discuss such things. Allah is great and that is enough for me!", he broke in. "Now, have you decided to tell me where you come from, how you got here and who sent you?", he asked the newly appointed Count, while taking care not to meet the eyes of his son.

But Hernando held his peace. He had followed their conversation carefully and was strangely fascinated by it. Maybe Toribio's God was becoming more meaningful to him. The way his son spoke was very different from the way he would have spoken to the Saracen. He had more in common with Tariq than with his son. This was more an intuition than a rational deduction, but for this very reason it struck him with greater force. Toribio seemed to speak out of a heart far greater than his own heart, more understanding, gentle and strong than all the hearts present in that cell at that moment.

"Are you ready to speak, then?", insisted Tariq son of Ziyad.

"I've nothing to say, except that your father would have been more blessed if he had had a son like mine!", replied the Autrigonian.

"Then let me tell you that I am tired of your impudence. My father Ziyad lived as a slave of the Byzantines all his life and I had to bring seafood home every day from Tangiers to help our family. I won't allow you to insult me any more. I've had enough of you!", declared the Berber. "Today, when the sun is at its zenith, you will be taken to the arena of the old Roman circus and there each of you will be pulled apart by four horses. Is that what you want?", he asked seriously.

Hernando did not give an inch.

"Tell that false Jew of yours that we Del Valles fear death no more than he bothers to disguise his falsehood! Indeed, thank him from us for his splendid hospitality!", he said with defiance.

Tariq then looked at him with respect. "Kupraman has told me you have knowledge of a magic cross. Is that true or not?", he asked.

Father and son looked at each other for an instant, but neither of them spoke.

"All right, then . . . may Allah's will be done! I don't care much about your crosses, and even less about Kupraman's intentions . . . I am a warrior of Allah and I follow my leaders' orders . . . If you won't answer my questions, you will die like all the other infidels . . . That's all I have to say!", he said, unable to conceal a grimace of bitterness.

"Can I ask you just one more thing?", said Toribio.

The general looked at him impatiently.

"Make it the last, because I have more important things to do than waste time with a couple of muleheads like you!", he replied in irritation.

"What has become of Agasinda, the girl who was with me at the abbey of Santa Maria de Monsacri? Is she still alive?"

"Very much alive and in the capable hands of Governor Munuza!", replied Tariq.

Toribio went an even lighter shade of pale.

"In the hands of that lustful devil?", he broke in furiously, seeking an approval that was unlikely to be forthcoming from the mind of Tariq.

The latter looked at him and understood that the pair must be in love. And certainly the boy had touched on a sore point. Munuza was not a good Muslim, as they all knew, but he was a brave soldier and capable commander, and had always been loyal to the Caliph of Damascus.

"I'm sorry", he said. "Such things do not depend on me. But I can tell you she is alive."

Then he looked again at the young Cantabrian who, a few moments earlier, had challenged his Allah. For an instant, he seemed unsure what to do with him. But eventually he recovered his customary confidence.

"Give them something to eat and drink, and deliver them to the circus in three hours' time", he ordered the two jailers in blue.

He threw a final angry glance at Hernando then gave a brief nod to Toribio, almost as a sign of respect. But Toribio was looking down at the ground, his eyes swollen with tears. His mind was already wandering through the rooms of Munuza's mansion. He did not even hear the sound of the jailers shutting the door. The light seemed to have disappeared even from the oval window. All Toribio was aware of was the smell of death. It was all over. He had lost the thing he loved most and not even his father's company could console him.

His father immediately understood what he was thinking.

"I believe we have a good chance of getting out of this alive", he said.

Toribio hardly heard his father's unusually optimistic words. What was there that could console him now? Even the Ruby Cross seemed less important. And maybe that was his mistake. The same mistake he had made at the church of the Angels of Love, when, in prey to the passions of the flesh, he had neglected his responsibility. He had allowed his animal instincts to prevail over his spirit, forgetting the mission St. Jacobus had entrusted to him.

But was it really so terrible a thing? Was he to be punished by the God of love for loving a girl who loved him? For the first time, he wondered whether God really loved him. For the first time, he felt that even God had abandoned him.

CHAPTER XXI

THE RED LION

The circus was a pale shadow of its former glory. There were clumps of weeds everywhere and fig saplings had sprung up in the circular arena, which was about four hundred yards across. In classical times, it had been venerated by the senators and proconsuls of Roman Hispania; now it was little more than a sandy clearing surrounded by crumbling, grass-covered stands.

Here were seated a few dozen prominent citizens, mostly Hispano-Roman, with their wives and offspring, all awaiting the execution of the barbarians from the North. Their costumes were varied. Some of the beautiful younger women wore light-blue, red or crimson tunics made of silk or satin, set off with glass-paste ear-rings and anklets. The men wore short white togas held in at the waist by belts with gilded buckles, and cloaks fastened on the left shoulder by silver pins. They chatted among themselves about the latest news from Lusitania, or the Numidian troops recently arrived from Africa. Some hoped they would see governor Tariq take his seat in the main box.

All in all, they were a class of sycophants accustomed to collaborating with the invader and unhealthily eager to see the execution of the vanquished. The atmosphere was far removed from that of the old gladiatorial games, when the public would salute the arrival of the imperial legate, come to seek the blessing of the Roman gods. These were the last generations of a phantom Empire that had lost the concept of the state and the religion that upheld it, and submitted to any new occupying power, provided it satisfied their lust for violence. There was no longer any sense of community, only the individual instincts and ephemeral passions of listless, cynical patricians.

Toribio and his father were delivered to the centre of the arena by cart, soon followed by Liuva and Teudiselo. Next came a group of well-built, half-naked slaves leading angry, snorting horses. Another man, also stripped to the waist but less muscular, his face hidden by a grey turban, ran up with a basket of chains. He sorted them out and fastened them round the necks

of the horses and to the wrists and ankles of the condemned men. He then ran over to the nearest stand and climbed up onto a wooden platform from which he dominated the whole arena.

Despite his horizontal position, Hernando could make out the faces of the people in the stands, but there was no sign of Kupraman or Tariq. All he saw were some Saracen guards, maybe a pair of Berber officials with their escort. So he turned his head towards his son, stretched out between the horses to one side of him.

"Toribio, forgive me for all the mistakes I made in bringing you up, and ask your God to forgive me!", he said.

The sunlight beat down on the sharp profile, tanned skin and dirty long hair of the backwoods Judge. But his son was silent, intent on the sky above. Maybe he was praying. Then Hernando tried to attract the attention of the Visigoth brothers. The latter, however, were still dazed by the effect of the potion they had drunk the previous evening and barely aware of what was happening around them.

The crowd, meanwhile, had begun to bay for blood, shouting encouragement to the grooms who would soon be giving the horses their heads. A drum roll echoed around the arena. Then the sound of a bugle. Then another drum roll. Hernando would have at least liked to receive a reply from his son, but Toribio was still silent, looking up to heaven. After a third blast on the bugle, silence fell. Hernando felt a sudden strain on each of his limbs. He tried to resist, but the pain was tearing him apart.

"Toribio, Toribio! My son, call upon your mother and tell her to welcome us into heaven!", he shouted, breaking the pervading silence.

The crowd remained dumb, as if spellbound by the supreme violence of the moment. Hernando was on the point of fainting. He heard his bones creak like corn being crushed within the muscles of his arms and legs. His final moments had come. Only then did he hear the voice of his son:

"Rejoice, because you restore men's souls;
Rejoice, because you bring reconciliation where there is discord;
Rejoice, because you plundered the kingdom of the dead;
Rejoice, because through you comes the blazing light.
Rejoice, eternally Virgin bride!"

Suddenly the pain ceased. He felt himself being eased onto the ground as if the chains had slackened, heard the sound of horses' hooves pass close by his head, throwing sand in his face. When at last he was able to rub his eyes, he looked towards Toribio. Miraculously, his son was

standing upright in the middle of the arena, looking up to heaven. Beside him were the Visigoth brothers. Their chains had disappeared, as had the horses. The crowd was still present, but all of them seemed to be looking upwards in amazement.

An enormous winged red lion filled the sky overhead. The people immediately began crying out in terror. Some rushed to the exits. Others were simply dumbstruck. But it was too late. A frightful roar rumbled around the terraces of the circus and throughout Toledo. People in the streets and marketplaces stopped dead. Everyone could see the massive bulk of the lion in the torrid Hispanish sky. It roared again, face streaked with blood, jaws open wide, revealing powerful teeth. The sky turned green as emerald and a band of silver suddenly flashed across it. The lion spat forth a jet of fire, which instantly consumed the Saracen guards and the man with the grey turban. Then the air was rent by another bellow and a second sheet of flame swept down on the slaves who had brought in the horses, transforming them into human torches. The crowd ran this way and that, weeping and wailing. But they were shown no mercy: the ferocious eyes of the great beast were turned on the terraces and fire went forth from him, licking them all up.

Hernando and Toribio hugged each other, as did Liuva and Teudiselo. But there was no time for discussion. Four horses came galloping into the arena and stopped in front of them. Their weapons were fastened to their saddles. Toribio recognised Asfredo, who lowered his head to be stroked by his master and greeted him like a long-lost friend.

"Asfredo, what a joy to see you again", murmured Toribio.

The four men mounted quickly and spurred their horses out of the circus and into the city streets.

Everywhere, people were prostrate, terrified by this sign of divine wrath. The red lion stood out over the walls of Toledo, clearly visible from every quarter. Old people were praying in silence, children weeping with fear. Merchants, blacksmiths and potters hurried to barricade the entrances to their shops. Innkeepers pushed their customers out of doors and shut themselves up inside with their families. Arab and Berber soldiers ran to man defensive positions, some on the walls, some on the wooden towers guarding the gates. A few dozen archers formed up in the market place and, in response to a signal from a bearded officer, loosed off a hundred or

more arrows at the beast. But in vain: the lion emitted an immense sheet of flame and burned them all up like stubble.

The four were now approaching Porta Caesaraugusta. But they still had to get past the Saracen palisade, on which were stationed dozens of archers and engineers manning fixed arbalests. The Saracen captains gave the order to fire and the missiles rained down on them like sparks from a volcanic eruption. But the darts were mysteriously diverted and buried themselves in the ground on either side, as if an invisible shield were protecting them.

They were through the Saracen defences and only a hundred yards from the gate named after the Emperor Octavian, when a deep pit suddenly opened up before them and sulphurous steam shot up from the bowels of the earth. The horses reared up in fright. Then they heard a terrifying neighing and a black, long-haired charger materialised before them. The rider was a monk dressed in black, a hood covering his head. His wide, flat face was reminiscent of a parchment, his eyes round and glassy like those of a fish, and he wore a goatee beard. The four looked up at the sky, but it was now its normal blue; the lion had disappeared.

"Now your friend has left, I'd like to know how you intend to get past!", screamed the demon, pointing his sword towards Toribio.

"Go back to hell!", broke in another powerful voice coming from the shade of a nearby olive tree.

They all turned and saw an old man, maybe eighty years old, whose legs could hardly support him. He was wearing a woollen cloak, dirty and threadbare, but the buckle of his belt was in the shape of a Visigoth eagle. His beard and hair were long and unkempt, his face deformed by countless scars and wrinkles. In the place of his eyes were two horrific empty sockets.

"Get out of my way, disgusting beggar!", cried the demon.

"Not until I have hurled you back into the sewer from which you came, Sisbertus, slave of Oppa!", replied the other, emerging from the shadows and taking up position before him.

Hernando had recognised the demon Monofonso, but no one guessed the identity of the old mendicant, nor what was happening. The bystanders, who had flattened themselves against the walls of the houses, began to creep nearer.

"What is he doing? Is he mad?", broke in a young carpenter, looking into the appalled faces of his friends. "That's the blind fellow who lives under the olive tree. What is he trying to do?"

The crowd had crept closer for a better view. Everything seemed fixed and unreal, as in an ancient image that had come to life after many years.

"Don't you remember me?", asked the old man, unsteady and trembling, addressing the demon with the parchment face.

The latter climbed down from his long-haired horse and went over to him. He examined him for a moment, then recoiled in horror.

"Sunifred!", he exclaimed.

"The very same, in flesh and blood, as you can see, after twenty-two years in darkest hell for listening to your evil advice and rebelling against my king!", replied the sightless old man.

Sisbertus looked at him, as if turned to stone.

"How can you recognise me? My face is not what is was then", said the former bishop of Toledo.

"I know. It was disfigured by the boiling oil poured on it by King Ergica's bodyguards, or so they told me, but your voice has not changed!", replied Sunifred.

The crowd had meanwhile formed a circle around the pit and silently watched the unfolding of this mysterious and totally unexpected drama. None of the horsemen dared dismount. Toribio looked up at the sky for some sign of the red lion, but it had vanished. What did it mean? Why was God abandoning them in the face of a satanic enemy far more dangerous than Tariq's guards?

He exchanged questioning glances with his father and the Visigoth brothers. They were equally bewildered. Then someone in the crowd began to incite Sunifred: "Go for him! Go for him! Hurl him back into the abyss!".

Sunifred's eyeless sockets continued to be riveted on the bloodshot eyes of the demon Sisbertus, who remained still as a statue. Then the old nobleman began to tremble visibly. His body quivered, his head shook from side to side. His limbs seemed to grow, his atrophied muscles to become vigorous and strong again. His skin changed colour, becoming white as snow. His face assumed the features of a young man, and two fine blue eyes appeared in the empty sockets. His white hair was restored to a youthful blond and his beard was clean and neatly clipped. His chest swelled and a long sword appeared in his right hand.

The rebel was reborn. The man who in his pride had challenged the king was now ready to challenge the Evil One to win forgiveness. The duel that followed was breathtaking. They crossed swords a thousand times, skilfully parrying each others' blows, the sound of their clashing blades deafening the bystanders. Sunifred at last found a way through his enemy's guard and wounded him in the left shoulder. The demon howled with rage and prepared to strike a mortal blow, raising the hilt of his sword to bring it down slantwise and sever his opponent's head. But the Visigoth nobleman ducked and, as the blow hissed harmlessly past, deftly extended his arm and sliced off Sisbertus's nose with the edge of his sword.

Sisbertus was beside himself, roaring oaths and curses and covering his blood-streaked face.

"You bastard, now you've got it coming to you!", he raged and, in his anger, managed to land a blow on Sunifred's right side.

The Visigoth backed off and staggered, lost his balance and fell to the ground. A pool of blood began to form around him. The demon was about to leap forward and pierce him through the heart, when another loud roar broke out.

They all raised their heads and saw the lion again, beating its wings directly above them. The demon hesitated and looked up, too.

"What do you want with us, heavenly beast? Can't you see that this soul belongs to us?"

"THERE IS NO SOUL THAT BELONGS TO SATAN WITHOUT MY LORD SEEKING TO SAVE HIM!", pronounced the beast. *"SUNIFRED HAS PAID FOR HIS SIN AND NO LONGER BELONGS IN YOUR WORLD. GET THEE GONE, EVIL ANIMAL, AND DON'T DARE TOUCH HIM!"*

The demon seemed to hesitate, poised above Sunifred's body. One blow would have finished him off. But instead he withdrew, returned to his long-haired charger, remounted in haste, turned to them all, exhibiting his lacerated, noseless face, and dived into the pit in a great flash of sulphurous yellow.

The crowd was still looking up to heaven.

"MAY THE WILL OF GOD BE DONE. HE ALWAYS FORGIVES HIS CHILDREN!", the lion roared again. He then flew towards the towers of the nearby gate and, with another jet of fire, scattered the few Saracens who had stayed to watch these extraordinary events. The way was now clear.

"GO! FOLLOW WHERE YOUR FAITH LEADS!", concluded the beast. Then he rose and, this time, vanished for good.

Toribio and the others were paralysed with amazement. Members of the crowd ran to help Sunifred. Toribio wanted to do the same and, having dismounted, approached to thank him. The handsome man with the noble features lay pale in their arms. Toribio grasped his hand and Sunifred looked into his eyes.

"You are the bearer, aren't you?", he asked.

The young Autrigonian felt a shiver run up his spine. He saw in those eyes the same light he had seen in the eyes of Liuvigoto.

"How do you know?", he asked.

"I was told by her, our Queen, when she appeared to me in a dream the other night! Go, Toribio Del Valle, carry out your mission and be quick, before the Evil One succeeds in preventing the Third Event!"

"What event? What are you talking about?", asked Toribio, now disturbed and anxious.

"Go and do not fear! The red lion will protect your people for all the centuries to come, but you must do your duty! Save the Ruby Cross before it is too late!"

Toribio would have liked to know more. But Sunifred swooned and died in their arms. The crowd began to murmur. Some knelt down and were followed by all the others. Toribio looked into the immobile blue eyes of the noble warrior from a world gone by. Then he turned to his father and companions.

"This is the sign . . . I'm sure of it!", he cried.

Asfredo came to his side and knelt down to let him mount. They hurriedly rode through the Porta Caesaraugusta, now undefended, and, after crossing the bridge over the Tagus, found Flavius, Valerio and Fruela waiting for them on horseback among the stalls of a deserted market. They were speechless. Toribio's eyes met those of Valerio.

"God be praised! You are safe, my friend!", exclaimed the monk joyfully.

"Did you see him?", asked Toribio.

Valerio simply nodded, and smiled serenely. Toribio was pleased to see Fruela again. He was seated behind Valerio, dumbfounded by what he had witnessed. Then, Toribio look respectfully at the Roman guide. Flavius,

who was equally shocked by the turn of events, introduced himself briefly and asked: "Shall we be returning to the Asturias?"

"Definitely not! We must ride in support of Amaya. We can now be sure that the Saracens will attack there first", declared Toribio.

The guide looked to Hernando, who nodded his agreement.

"We'll explain everything to you on the way . . . now let's get going!", said the Count of Valle.

Toribio spurred his horse along the old highway to Saragossa, and the others were only too ready to follow.

CHAPTER XXII

NO MAN'S LAND

They followed the course of the Tagus. The weather was torrid and the river had shrunk to a stream, leaving cracked mud on either side. At around the tenth hour, Flavius ordered a halt to water the horses, which were still fairly fresh.

"Are we stopping here?", asked Valerio.

"No, we can't afford to waste time! We must bring help to my brother-in-law before it is too late!", said Hernando in agitation, his face caked with dust and sweat.

Flavius agreed: "We'll travel all night, and tomorrow, too. We won't stop until we have circumvented the eastern slopes of the Sierra. The Saracen rearguard will be crossing it now. Maybe we shall still be in time to overtake them".

"But that means taking the longer way", argued Liuva, as he helped his brother to refasten his body armour.

"Yes, but there are only seven of us and we don't need to pitch camp. Speed is the only solution!", explained the Roman.

Hernando, Toribio and the Visigoth brothers were very tired. Unlike the others, they had suffered beatings in prison, and Toribio had been severely tortured. But the miraculous events of the day had spurred them on and they had no intention of taking it easy. So, refreshed by a little water and some of the dried meat provided by Flavius's friends, they continued on their way. They galloped all night, following the torch carried by their guide. There was no relief from the heat.

Towards morning, they reached a small hill town. The smoke rising from what remained of the houses indicated that the Saracens had already passed that way. They saw the mutilated bodies of the inhabitants piled up in the streets. The heads of men, women and children were heaped up in doorways. Some bodies had been burned, others hanged from the corners of their houses. Even the dogs had been slaughtered. An acrid smell filled their nostrils. The church, too, had been burned down.

"God of heaven, what horror is this?", exclaimed Valerio, barely containing his emotion.

"This is all that remains of Complutum, once one of the most beautiful hill towns in the Empire", replied Flavius sadly. "And this is what will happen to our people, unless we are there to defend them". He shook his horse's reins. "Let's go. We'd better stay away from the Sierra", he said, moving off in a southerly direction.

They galloped all day, Flavius always in the lead, his yellow handkerchief covering the lower part of his face to protect him from the dust. The others followed, wrapped in their cloaks, dripping with sweat. The air was dry and there was not so much as a breath of wind on that part of the meseta. The villages were few and far between. After the sixth hour they saw none at all, just emptiness. An undulating clay desert, in shades of yellow, red, ochre and brown, stretched before them. The only sign of civilisation were the milestones indicating the distance to Saragossa.

Around the tenth hour, with the sun beginning to set, Flavius slackened his pace and guided his horse towards an embankment at the end of a long sand dune. Here they found the remains of a perimeter wall, maybe the wall of an old fortress. Flavius dismounted and made his way to a mound between two pillars of white stone.

"Come, there is a well here!"

The others left their horses and helped him to let down some buckets abandoned nearby. There was water in plenty. They attended to the horses, which were exhausted and lathered with sweat, and finally took some rest.

Sitting on a large boulder, Hernando took this first opportunity to inform Valerio, Fruela and Flavius of what had happened in Toledo.

"Those demons really do exist. I got a good look at that Kupraman. Believe me, he had the face of a wild boar and he tried to poison us!", he began by way of opening.

"We were foolish to trust him. We should not have drunk that disgusting potion", said Teudiselo, helmet in hands and broadsword resting on his knee.

"By the Immaculate Virgin, it's true what you say . . . Thank goodness that lion intervened!", added Liuva, as he washed his long, dirt-encrusted beard with water from one of the buckets.

"Listen to me, men!", Toribio interrupted. "Let's thank God for helping us, but from now on we must be more careful. The Evil One is everywhere. Kupraman is just one of many. There's also Monofonso, who turned out to be Sisbertus, the traitor. It was he who gave you the message, father, wasn't it?"

"Quite right, Toribio. And I fell for it like a silly idiot. But at least that demon is back in hell for a while", replied Hernando.

"Who knows what that monster Astasio is doing? And there seem to be some Byzantines involved. You said you saw one at the Bear Pass, didn't you?", asked Toribio.

"We all saw him, Toribio", broke in Valerio, who was chewing an oatcake.

"I really don't know how the Byzantines fit into the picture, especially since they, too, are threatened with invasion by the Saracens", reflected Flavius, who was getting his breath back after removing his cape and unfastening his heavy chest armour.

"True. That devil Kupraman admitted as much", brooded the Judge. "God knows what is happening, though Tariq was quite clear about it. Maybe he was sure we would be killed in the circus, or he would never have told us so much", continued Hernando, now busily chewing a flat piece of bread.

"What exactly did he say?", asked Liuva.

"That they intend to take the whole of Cantabria, then attack the Asturias. That's why we saw so many of them that night at the pass", replied Hernando.

The Visigoth looked at his brother, who echoed his puzzled expression.

"Then wouldn't it be best if we warned Pelayo?", he asked.

"There's not time. Unless you want to cross the Sierra on your own and run the risk of stopping an Arab arrow. I want to hurry to my brother-in-law's side. The Asturians can wait; they are better defended. If we manage to join up with Petro, we will send a messenger from Amaya as soon as possible . . . Do you want to go, Fruela?"

The young pup now had the air of a man who had fought a hundred battles.

"I will do everything Toribio asks of me. He is my captain!"

The others laughed. Toribio looked at him lovingly.

"One day you will do things not even I could dare for the people of my land", he declared.

Fruela looked at him with naïve enthusiasm. He felt he had almost won his pardon. Instinctively, he turned his eyes towards Flavius, who had reproved him so severely at the Reina Pass. The Roman legionary returned his look as if he were of one mind with Toribio. Fruela felt he was forgiven at last. Now he felt worthy to be part of the group. So the seven of them quickly ate their food and prepared rudimentary beds for themselves, using their saddlebags, shields and a few clods of turf. The sun was now setting and an orange glow lit up the clouds gathering in the east.

Flavius was standing on the parapet of the wall, looking east. Toribio surprised him there, motionless as an ancient Roman sentry, scanning the threatening horizon. For an instant, he had a sense of *déjà vu*, as if he had been there centuries earlier, in an irredeemable past.

"What's on your mind?", asked the young man from Valle.

"Do you really want to know, young Autrigonian?", came the reply.

"Yes!", said Toribio, watching the Roman's steely face.

Flavius looked again towards the horizon. There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the chirping of crickets.

"You see, boy, I'm thinking of my ancestors. You must have noticed that for several hours we have not seen a village?"

"That's true", replied Toribio. "Maybe the Saracens have destroyed them and the sand has covered them over."

The Roman gave him an avuncular look.

"No, Toribio. They were not destroyed by the Saracens, though it is true that the sand has covered them over. There were so many of them, you know . . . I remember when I was a child my father Marius once took me to Caesaraugusta and we travelled this very road . . . Yes, we stopped right here . . . at the very same well . . . But in those days this was a military settlement, garrisoned by a century of soldiers from Complutum. There were at least ten dormitories, an inn and a number of dwellings . . . My father told me this was one of the most important roads in Hispania, though he referred to it as Iberia . . ."

"You mean that under this large sand dune . . . ?, began Toribio, awaiting the other's affirmation.

"Yes, exactly. The fortress has been covered by this mountain of sand . . . but there are no bodies beneath it . . . The people just went away!"

"Where did they go?", asked Toribio.

"They went back to the big cities, some to Toledo, some to Caesaraugusta . . . some maybe to Rome."

"But why?", asked the boy.

The Roman looked at him with sadness in his eyes.

"Because times have changed, young Cantabrian. The Empire is finished. You see, once the countryside and border areas hereabouts were settled by people who depended on the wealthy patrician villas. The inhabitants relied on well-paid and well-trained legionaries to maintain order and watch over the frontiers. There were wide, paved roads, splendid aqueducts, lanterns and torches kept lit along the highways, eating places and post houses, grammar and medical schools, gymnasiums for athletes, circuses to provide public entertainment, and a wealth of temples, clean and perfumed with nard and myrtle, where we could pray to our gods.

"Everything depended on Rome, our great eternal city, that had eyes everywhere and a Senate that took stock day by day of what was happening in the remotest corners of the earth", explained the Roman, momentarily overcome by nostalgia. "In those days, there was the same law for all. Everyone was of equal standing before the imperial legates, whether Hispanics or Gauls, Chaldeans or Alamanns. And all could appeal to a tribune of the plebs, even those who were not Roman citizens. The people could rely on their protectors, whether in Toledo or Marsiglia. My father often took me to listen to the orators in the forum at Legio . . .", here he stopped and lowered his eyes. "Then . . . it all came to an end", he added.

"All of a sudden?", asked Toribio, fascinated by this civilisation which, for him, accustomed to a peasant way of life with a clear tribal hierarchy, was difficult to imagine.

"No, I think I have witnessed the very end of a process which began many centuries earlier, maybe on the death of the Emperor Theodosius, when his sons Arcadius and Honorius had the mad idea of dividing the Empire in two and then, alas, began recruiting barbarians who did not know a word of Latin!", he replied angrily. "Confederates they called them, but they were not Romans. They had different laws and gods. What did they know of the values they were supposed to uphold?"

"What values are you talking about?", asked Toribio, who in fact had a good understanding of what Flavius meant.

"Those of the Res Publica . . . You know what that means?"

"The public good, isn't it?"

"Exactly. In other words, the state, the commonwealth, that which belongs to everyone, not just a minority of patricians or those with the physical might to impose their will!", replied the other.

Toribio was very much struck by what Flavius had said. Basically, he was a barbarian, too, but he had been educated. He had learned good manners, grammar and rhetoric at the schools in Amaya. So he was bold to state his own opinion.

"But we, too, have changed, haven't we?"

"And how is that?", asked Flavius with a smile.

"Our Holy Mother Church has converted us and done things very similar to those done by the emperors!"

"What, for instance?", asked Flavius, taking an interest.

"The Church has preached principles of equality and toleration even more demanding than those prescribed by the laws of the Res Publica. I believe She has become that very thing", claimed Toribio proudly.

"What thing?"

"The Roman Republic. Today's new Rome is the Church, and her Pontiffs are, for us, what the emperors were for you!"

Flavius gave him a long silent look. The boy had disturbed him.

"But this new God you are speaking of . . . What has he done to deserve such honour? Were not our gods and the great Jupiter who commands them sufficient?"

Toribio said nothing. He could not expect to change in the space of one evening the ideas of a man who had inherited such time-honoured beliefs.

"I cannot answer your question, but I will pray for you to this God who so baffles you, and maybe one day you will understand!", said the young man from Valle.

"You are a man of strong spirit. I admire you!", proclaimed the other, shaking his hand vigorously. "Now we had better go and rest. We still have a long way to go and I want to set out at dawn."

So they made their way back to the others, who were already asleep and, spreading their cloaks over themselves, said goodnight. Toribio prayed that the Lord would help them fulfil their mission and also asked him to arouse faith in his Roman companion: the last true soldier, he thought, of a truly amazing Empire.

The seven set off again at daybreak. The Sierra were now no more than a purple outline on the horizon. The sky was a dense opaque blue,

like topaz. The air had a sharp taste, like daisy flowers, but it was merely warm, not burning hot like the air of Toledo. So they travelled north for a further three days, stopping just the time necessary to water the horses at wells known to Flavius and sleep beneath the starry sky. By the fifth day after their escape, the riders looked like ghosts just emerged from a salt pan, so thick was the dust and sand caking their faces and armour, and the sweat that had crystallised on their beards and hair.

It was already evening when they were spotted by a monk keeping watch in the high niche of a bastion protecting an ancient sanctuary. They had reached Auca, the seat of a bishop since the time of King Reccared. The town was deserted. The inhabitants had abandoned houses, shops, taverns and market stalls in anticipation of the most recent Saracen incursion.

"There is no one left here, good sirs", said the monk who met them at the main gate.

"Where have they all gone?", asked Flavius.

"Many have fled to Amaya; the others have taken refuge in the mountains . . . Only three of us have stayed to look after the monastery. What is your errand?"

Flavius explained that they were intending to go to Amaya and would be stopping only one night, hoping for a decent bed and a little water for their horses. The monk offered them hospitality.

"We still have some supplies of fodder for your horses, and some spelt bread for yourselves. But I would advise you not to go that way. Some travellers stopped here this morning. People have already begun to flee, they told us. The Saracens have come down off the Sierra and are preparing to besiege the city. You are going towards certain death. They say there are several thousand of them!"

Flavius made no reply. They all dismounted, their horses almost collapsing from fatigue, and went into the monastery courtyard. A young lad in a monk's habit ran up, wanting to help them, and one by one led the horses off to the stables to be fed and watered. The seven men followed the first monk, who brought them in to what must have been the abbot's old Aula Magna. The tables had been overturned. On the floor there were still shards of glass and smashed candlesticks. The monk sat them down on a bench and brought them something to eat.

"Are you really sure you want to go to Amaya? Not even our Bishop Astolfo wanted to take refuge there. He has taken everyone to Pamplona.

He said there would be a massacre and it was safer to seek protection from the Vasconians and their patriarch Momo."

At the mention of the name, Hernando pricked up his ears.

"The Vasconians are still free, then?", asked the old Judge.

"Certainly they are, and people say they are preparing to defend themselves! A good thing we can count on them!", replied the monk.

Hernando would have like to comment on what he saw as excessive faith in the army of Patriarch Momo and his son Eneko, but he merely shot a glance at his son. Toribio looked back and smiled. This was not the moment to give vent to old grudges, and this time his father refrained. Instead he chewed on a loaf from the basket another monk had brought into the room, together with an amphora of wine. This man was much older and spoke with a different accent, maybe Greek, thought Toribio. The third monk exchanged a few words with Valerio, but not with the others.

"Amaya is not far now, brother. If you leave early tomorrow, you will be there before vespers", he said.

Valerio thanked him for the meal and promised he would pray for them. Then they were taken to a large dormitory and left to contend with some greasy, louse-infested sacks stuffed with straw. Flavius, Valerio and the two Autrigonians preferred to sleep on the stone floor, using their saddlebags for pillows. The others were not bothered by the insects and fell asleep without complaint.

They rode all day without a break. Towards the tenth hour, they made out the shape of high white walls rising from the slopes of the bleak Cantabrian mountains. They were now a matter of miles from Amaya. After almost a month of wandering, Toribio and his father were again breathing the air of home, even though Valle itself was still a good way off. Flavius had slowed his pace and the horses seemed more relaxed. In the minds of the seven companions, good humour began to prevail over the anguish and fatigue of recent days. They reached a desolate crossroads, marked only by a milestone.

"Only thirty miles to Amaya", announced Flavius, leading them to the right. They followed him without question. Their guide had brought them through. They all felt proud of him and spontaneously quickened their pace to ride at his side, wanting to present themselves at the city gate as a united group.

They had covered another couple of miles, the road becoming cleaner and better maintained, and were climbing a slight slope, when suddenly they came upon a number of burned and abandoned carriages in the middle of an open area of compacted clay. Instinctively they turned aside and approached the smoking wrecks, noticing the bodies of some soldiers in familiar armour. Liuva recognised the peacock's feathers on their shields.

"These are our people", said the Visigoth. They quickly dismounted and bitterly surveyed the scene. A dozen soldiers lay there, most with their throats slit, some decapitated.

"What does this mean?", asked Hernando out loud.

"A patrol from the city, no doubt", replied Teudiselo, his voice strangled with rage.

"Strange, there are many more footprints than I would have expected if our men had camped here", observed Liuva, examining the ground.

"An ambush?", suggested Hernando, also trying to interpret the confusion of footprints and wheel-ruts.

"How could it have been an ambush?", argued Flavius. "There is no vegetation or cover of any kind."

At this point they heard a groan coming from one of the overturned carriages. They approached and saw that it was a kind of litter. Toribio and Teudiselo grasped the axles, while the others heaved the body of the vehicle upright. Underneath lay the driver, an elderly man with a dirty beard and dark Cantabrian complexion. He was covered in blood, with two arrows planted in his chest, but still alive. Valerio immediately put the mouth of his water bottle to the man's lips. He gulped down the liquid and thanked his rescuer.

"They tricked us!", he whispered.

"Who tricked you?", asked Hernando.

"The Saracens . . . We were supposed to meet here to discuss peace terms . . . It was our Bishop's idea . . . Petro told him it would be dangerous, but he wouldn't listen . . . We set out this morning . . ."

"What peace are you talking about? What Bishop?", asked Toribio, puzzled.

"Fruttuoso, young man, the Bishop of Amaya! Petro was not keen on the idea, but Fruttuoso was insistent on discussing peace terms with those miscreants.", replied the wounded man, his voice weakening.

On hearing the name, Valerio and Toribio shuddered: Fruttuoso, their great friend, who had taught them so much, at the Benedictine school and

from the pulpit of St. Eufemia, now suddenly touching their lives again at a moment of great danger.

"What has become of him?", asked Valerio urgently.

"They took him away. We met up with them this morning . . . We were carrying the white flag of peace . . . There were three times as many of them . . . Arabs, all in crescent-moon helmets, archers . . . Their leader listened to the Bishop for a few moments . . . then began laughing . . . Our men did not have time to react . . . We were shot through with arrows in no time at all . . . Then they finished off the survivors with their swords, burned the carriages and kidnapped the Bishop . . . I was left under the vehicle . . . but . . .", and at this point he fainted away.

The others were reduced to silence. Clearly this was the outcome of a last-minute peace initiative, willed by a Bishop who for years had been reputed a saint. But why would they kidnap him? Why butcher ambassadors bearing a white flag in so cowardly a fashion?

"They'll pay for this, too!", murmured Hernando, looking at the pale, contorted face of the Cantabrian, then asked Liuva and Teudiselo to lift the man up behind him on his horse.

Valerio and Toribio looked at each other sadly. Never would they have imagined so wretched an end during those happy days they had spent together in Amaya. Never would they have expected a martyrdom of this kind in a land where the gospel had been preached for two centuries. So the devil had carried him off—and had come to get him on home territory, as if to humiliate the many Christians who had sought protection under his reassuring wings. If so great a saint had failed, what hope was there for poor sinners like them. Such were Toribio's thoughts as he instinctively remounted, barely aware of the great weariness that had come over him.

A little later, totally exhausted, he was about to slip from his horse's back, when his father gave him a slap between the shoulder blades.

"Take heart, Toribio, we've arrived!", he said.

Toribio looked up. There, before his eyes, in the lengthening evening shadows, the city stood out from his beloved mountains like the figure of a giant camouflaged among the rocks: the high walls reflecting the light of the setting sun, the austere battlements extending for at least three miles, the ten marble towers projecting from the corners of the five concentric circles of walls; the red shingled roofs, temple pediments and church domes visible above the walls of the inner fortifications; the fresher air and

pungent smell of hay meadows; and the hubbub of the hoards of people filing through the enormous opening of the main gate.

They had arrived. Amaya, the ancient Cantabrian city, the jewel his ancestors had handed over to the Romans of Octavian, was at last welcoming him into its arms as a mother her child after long years of separation. The riders were now at the end of their tether, incapable even of speech. This time the officer on duty did not keep them waiting. The helmets of the Visigoth brothers had been spotted from the terraces, as had the shield with the lion's head symbol and the old driver, tied senseless to the strong back of the warrior with the crow's feathers in his leather helmet.

The group was immediately received by an escort of young men in shining armour. Toribio was aware of a familiar voice, a deep baritone: his uncle.

CHAPTER XXIII

AMAYA

The bear of a man in the red cape welcomed his nephew with the tightest of hugs. He was visibly moved.

"So you are alive, Toribio, darling of our family!", boomed his voice under the arched ceiling of the monumental southern gateway.

Toribio felt much of his tiredness melt in the warmth of those words.

"It was hard but, as you see, I've got him back!", broke in his father, as he helped two surgeons transfer to a stretcher the wounded man he had insisted on bringing back with him.

"May the Lord receive you into glory, dear brother from Autrigonia! And to think that I was prepared to leave everything to come and find you!", said the Duke of Amaya, still stroking the dirty, sand-laden hair of his nephew.

"And I see that my best men have not let me down!", he continued, congratulating Liuva and Teudiselo. The scar-faced Visigoth and his brother with the cropped ear saluted their master, raising their right arms.

"We are proud to have done our duty and obeyed your orders!", said Liuva, his voice broken with tiredness. They, too, shook hands with Petro.

"These two brothers were magnificent . . . They fought like lions . . . If only I could have them with me for another hundred years . . . I would forget how to use a mace!", Hernando insisted, then added as an afterthought: "But Teudiselo should be grateful for the medical knowledge of this monk."

Valerio twisted his head this way and that out of modesty. Petro embraced his brother-in-law and wanted to kiss the monks' hands, but Valerio drew back, as if he were not worthy to receive such homage from a patrician.

"No, I insist. God only knows how happy I am to see you all again safe and sound. I have prayed night and day for the success of your mission. Who knows what things you must have seen!", added the Duke.

Hernando shook his head as if to rid himself of horrible memories.

"It's better we don't talk about it. Thanks to my companions and this amazing guide, we managed to get out of that hell-hole. Even if the oracles had told me so, I would not have thought it possible!", commented the Count of Valle.

Petro also wanted to thank Flavius, who replied with a smile: "I have learned more from this journey than in my last ten years as a scout. These are not just companions; I count them as comrades-in-arms, Duke Petro!"

Flavius was just as exhausted as the others, but his voice was as firm and controlled as when he had first introduced himself to them at the Reina Pass. His constitution had not been in the least affected by the thirst and suffering of so many days on horseback.

And as he, too, was shaking hands with the Visigoth Duke, a soldier came forward wearing fine metal armour over a knee-length turquoise tunic. His eyes were the same colour as his garment, his hair black and erect like the bristles of a curry comb.

"Where is Fruela?", he asked, smiling at the others.

"Bartuelo! Praise God, here I am!", exclaimed the lad, overcome with emotion.

He was almost in tears at being reunited with his first captain after so many days. Bartuelo was slightly embarrassed, remembering that until a few weeks ago he had been only too ready to tease him in front of the other Asturians. But now he thanked God that Fruela had come through safely. And the person standing before him was no longer a child but a hardened warrior like the others, weary and covered in sand and dust from the hardships he had shared with his companions.

Bartuelo noted the sword cuts in his shield and mangled mail on his forearm.

"Well done! I see that this time you have done your bit, kid", he said, putting on a gruff air.

Fruela appreciated Bartuelo's approval even more than the hard-won esteem of Flavius. The Roman was high in his estimation, but the affirming words of a member of his own tribe were even more welcome.

"I saw him put paid to more than one Saracen, alone and in the middle of the night!", declared their Roman guide, placing his hand on the youngster's shoulder.

"Your father Froila will be proud of you . . . I will tell him the news as soon as we get back to Cangas!", concluded the leader of the Arcadeuni.

The triangular face, covered in pimples and unruly stubble, lit up with pleasure.

"Now follow me, all of you!", boomed Petro's voice, gesturing to the guards to go ahead and clear a way for them. The seven companions followed the Duke across the cobbled area leading to the gate in the second wall, past glassmakers' and potters' workshops, three and four-storey red-brick dwellings, the porticos of old patrician houses and little squares graced with fountains. Once through the gate, they marched along a colonnaded avenue leading to a splendid flight of pink marble steps, at the top of which stood what survived of the city's ancient Roman buildings. Flavius recognised the temples of Mars, Minerva and Jupiter, then the baths, the "new" theatre and the old *tabularium*. Toribio remembered the places in which he had walked with Valerio, reciting Virgil's poems and reading the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. It was there that he had learned Latin.

Entering the third circle of walls, the young man from Valle recognised the churches of St. Eulalia, St. Luca and St. Philippus, and knew that, after crossing what remained of the forum, they would come to the basilica of St. Eufemia, where he had often listened to Bishop Fruttuoso's sermons. He instinctively looked at Valerio, to discover that his friend was silently weeping

"I told him not to go!", said his uncle, who turned round at that very moment, as if by telepathy.

"He was a holy man. No one could have prevented him from seeking peace, even in the present circumstances", replied Toribio.

Valerio was still silent.

"Let's hope he returns soon", was all he said, after a long pause.

Meanwhile, the gates of the lower circles had closed with deafening thuds on the orders of the archer captains guarding them. Hernando had counted hundreds of defenders on the bastions of the first three walls, and had seen others peering out from the battlements of the corner towers. Around them, meanwhile, other infantrymen were moving up and down, using mules to drag small onagers and mangonels to be heaved up onto the fortifications, and pushing carts laden with projectiles to serve the ballistae already in position. The common people had quickly retreated into the brick houses, large and small. Curtains had been drawn across the openings and unglazed windows. The butchers' shops, haberdashers' stalls and inns were deserted. A few people were still about, lighting the torches

bracketed above entrance ways and windows, and the braziers placed on temple stairways. From time to time, they met a mounted patrol doing their rounds. They all gave the Duke a right-arm salute and went about their business.

"I must warn you that the Saracens number at least seven thousand, brother-in-law!", Hernando announced at this point.

The light seemed to go out of Petro's bulging eyes at this unwelcome piece of news.

"Are you serious?", he asked, turning pale.

"We saw them at the Bear Pass . . . and we were told as much by Tariq, whom we had the dubious pleasure of meeting in the prison in Toledo!", explained Hernando, frowning.

Petro said nothing as he exchanged salutes with a group of artillery officers. Then his face seemed to light up with a sinister glow.

"Let them send all the legions they want! We'll be only too pleased to receive them!", he said with conviction, quickening his pace. So they passed through the gate of the fourth circle. In the final quadrangle were located only the church of St. Firminus and the White Palace, headquarters of the Officium Palatinum.

"You're too tired to come up with me now", said Petro. "My lieutenants are still busy discussing tactics with the captains responsible for the troops on the walls . . . but it is better you go and rest. My wife Teodosinda is expecting you at the *domus*. Be patient with her. Since this war started, she has been worse than a Cassandra!"

Into Toribio's mind came the image of his aunt, always sad, giving him sidelong looks as he ate in silence at the long table in the old *triclinium* on summer evenings. A tall, slender woman, her blond hair gathered in a silver coronet similar to his own.

Only occasionally was he able to amuse her, when he read to her from Horace's odes, or when they strolled on the peristyle of the *domus ducalis* overlooking the upper part of the town. He could not understand what his aunt found so entertaining about those love songs, which to him, a boy of thirteen, seemed so far removed from the chaste love he had accepted as normal from Valerio's teachings. But that was the character of Aunt Teodosinda, who could not read but seemed to take pleasure in those strange verses, especially the ones dedicated to Lydia and Lice. Lost in these memories and overcome with weariness, he and Valerio reached the

ducal residence. His father and the others had insisted on going with Petro to the White Palace. The attack was imminent and, though they were tired out, they wanted to share the information they had gleaned during their expedition to Toledo.

The *domus ducalis* stood on the slope rising from the great south-eastern tower of the fifth and last circle of walls. The city was spread out below, with torches and braziers providing some light in the deepening dusk. Petro's improvised escort handed them over to the servants waiting at the main door. Toribio and Valerio entered a spacious hallway, adorned with tall black marble columns and effigies of classical gods. The servants accompanied them along corridors to the Day Room. As they trod the white marble flooring, they heard in the distance the notes of a lyre, then a child singing. They were left at the entrance of an enormous, high-ceilinged room, its walls hung with linen draperies featuring the crismon symbol. Seated on an acacia-wood throne was a woman of about forty, clothed in a scarlet *colobium* and a long purple veil that concealed her face. Her bowed head was graced by a silver tiara and a coronet of plum blossom. His aunt seemed quite unaware of them as she listened to the child, who was performing on a raised platform with a small orchestra.

Toribio walked forward and presented himself.

"Salve, *domna* Teodosinda, do you recognise me?"

The Visigoth Duchess raised her head and parted her veil to reveal a gentle, child-like face and a pair of dreamy blue eyes. She took a long look at the young man in the green jerkin, his dirty hair held in place by a silver headband similar to her own.

"Toribio, it's you! Rejoicer of the springtime of my life! What are you doing here in these days of death and malediction?"

"I am here with my father Hernando, who is still with my uncle. We have travelled far with the intention of lending you our support."

"God bless you, dear relatives, come from your remote valleys to help us in these bitter times. Have you eaten, dear heart?"

"I have not touched food since yesterday evening. We stopped overnight at the monastery of Auca and have travelled all day, together with this friend of mine", he replied, indicating Valerio.

The woman turned her eyes on the sun-tanned, Mediterranean face of the monk with its seraphic expression.

"Valerio, of course, I remember you! Disciple of our dear Fruttuoso and tutor to this excellent nephew of mine . . . What a joy to see you again after so many years!"

"My joy is even greater, Duchess", declared Valerio with a smile.

Teodosinda rose, came down from the dais, kissed Toribio on the forehead and allowed the monk to kiss her right hand. Then she ordered the servants in attendance to run and prepare rooms and baths for them.

"You must be exhausted! I do not know when the attack will come, but it is best you eat now, then you can rest for a few hours on the finest pillows I can provide."

The two of them thanked her and were led out by a pair of pages with Latin features. Then the choir started singing again—psalms for the hour of compline. The Duchess returned to her throne and concealed her face in the folds of her purple veil.

During the night Toribio dreamed of Agasinda. The girl was standing by the large glass window of a grey fortress, robed in a white dress and red cloak. Her gaze was on the distant horizon, as if in expectation. Then she began shouting: "Toribio, Toribio! Look on the lake! Our salvation is at hand!"

But suddenly the window was smashed and her face disappeared in a shower of broken glass. Toribio woke up, bathed in sweat, between the silk sheets and soft pillows of an enormous bed. It was only a nightmare, but he prayed that it would never come to pass. Anxiety tormented him and he could no longer sleep.

The room was empty, except for a brazier that had almost gone out and a couple of linen chests. A cool breeze was blowing from the terrace to one side of him. He put on a dressing-gown he found at the end of the bed and approached the window. Below him, standing by the parapet of the terrace, he made out a solitary figure, also dressed in a silk dressing-gown that came down to her bare feet.

"Can't you sleep, my child?", murmured the Venus-like figure, who had not moved at his approach, her now-unveiled face continuing to gaze out over the town.

"It would seem that you cannot sleep, either, aunt", replied Toribio, enchanted by the beauty of the scene.

"What you see is our last hope. If the Saracens win this battle, it will be the end of us all . . . two centuries of admirable government . . . since we first came to these Iberian lands", murmured the Duchess again.

Toribio watched her closely in the light of the lantern she had placed on the parapet. She was still very beautiful, especially with her hair loose on her shoulders and her bosom, graced by a lapis lazuli pendant, full and rounded as she breathed in deeply. In contrast, Toribio noticed that her belly was slightly swollen and awkward.

"It is obvious, isn't it?", she asked, turning towards him and fixing him with a tender, maternal gaze.

"You are expecting a child!", replied her nephew.

"If it is a boy, we shall call him Alfonso. Do you like the name?"

Toribio smiled in his embarrassment.

"Don't take it as a bad omen, aunt. Let those devils grab all the land they want. No one can go against the will of God. If our race is to survive, it will be through the children we have conceived!", he declared.

"Those are fine words. You have always been a bringer of faith. I should have spoken with you more often", replied his aunt and caressed his cheek.

"For you and your people I have a mission to accomplish, but . . .", Toribio broke off, remembering his pact with St. Jacobus. "I can't say any more than that . . . It's too long a story."

The Duchess looked at him, half puzzled, half anxious, then burst into tears.

"I'm afraid, dear nephew. I'm afraid. If they kill us, it will be the end of everyone and everything!"

Toribio took her hands in his and began to ask the Virgin Mary to save them. His aunt repeated the words of his prayer, still sobbing. When Toribio finished, she clasped him tightly to her breast.

"Now go back to sleep. I shall stay here a while longer to reflect", she said and handed him the lantern to help him find his way.

This time, Toribio fell into a deep slumber, but not for long.

"Hurry, Toribio, the attack has begun!", cried Valerio, pulling at the sheets.

Toribio dressed quickly and followed his friend out onto the terrace where, a few hours earlier, he had conversed with his aunt. It was still dark, but the sky above them was criss-crossed by trails of light.

"God protect us!", exclaimed the monk. The fiery projectiles were beginning to reach the first two circles of walls. Roofs were already on fire. They heard the sound of distant shouting. The ballistae of the corner towers were responding, but not with such intensity as the Saracen artillery. The din was increasing, when they were called inside by Teodosinda's servants.

"Quickly, sirs! This way! The Duchess is waiting for you! We must take refuge in the cellars!", cried an elderly Hispano-Roman in a worn, greasy toga. The two followed him along richly decorated corridors, now completely empty. They eventually came to some steep, narrow steps that descended into a cellar packed with wineskins and enormous amphorae, cobwebs everywhere. Here the Duchess was waiting for them with a few servant girls and a page or two.

"And what about my father? And my friends? Where are they?", asked Toribio.

"They are still at the White Palace with your uncle. But it is better you stay here. It is too dangerous to be out and about now."

"Never on your life! I cannot leave my father at this time!", replied the young man, slightly irritated.

Toribio left them there and made his way desperately back up the stairs. At the main gate, he found nobody. He opened it with difficulty. Outside, soldiers and terrified townsfolk were shouting and running hither and thither. Projectiles seemed to be falling ever nearer. It was difficult to make progress in the press, but eventually he came to the square in front of the gateway to the fifth circle. Many people were trying to get in. He tried to persuade the guards, but they were deaf to his pleas.

He was about to draw his sword, when he was restrained by a tall warrior in a red and white cape over a full-length coat of mail—a man he had seen somewhere before.

"It must be Toribio, son of Judge Hernando!", said the other, breaking into a broad friendly smile only partly hidden by a thick blond moustache.

Then Toribio recognised him. It was Gunderic, the messenger who had been sent to Valle a month earlier.

"For the love of God, Gunderic son of Giveric, our guest in Valle!", exclaimed Toribio in surprise.

"In flesh and blood, my friend, and now I see you are a guest of my people!", replied the other.

"My father is in the palace with Uncle Petro and his lieutenants. Will you help me get to them?", asked the boy.

"That's exactly what I intend to do. I'm the senior of those lieutenants, young fellow from Valle", declared the mountain of a man towering over him, eyes framed between nose guard and cheek protectors.

The Visigoth gestured to the guards, who opened the gate without batting an eyelid and let them in, immediately shutting it again on the crowd behind. Gunderic and Toribio crossed a flagged open space punctuated by fountains, decorative capitals and shrines and entered an alley, paved with porphyry and illuminated by dozens of torches, each set on a pillar. The warriors guarding the White Palace granted them admittance and so Toribio and his old friend finally reached the last Aula Regia of the Visigoth people.

They were in a vast room, paved with porphyry inlaid with onyx and alabaster. The high walls rose to the vaulted ceiling, where long ribs of vermilion marble formed elaborate interlocking arches. The columns of the tall, two-bay windows were surmounted by capitals featuring the usual Celtic floral decoration. The walls themselves were hung with the standards of ancient Roman legions, Visigoth and Cantabrian banners, stuffed stag's, bears' and wolves' heads and, beneath each window, the crismon symbol of Christ.

In the middle was an enormous rectangular table, on which were set out maps and rolls of despatches. A few of the persons present were standing, but most reclined drowsily on the wide, comfortably cushioned benches ranged around the room. Petro himself was on his feet, surrounded by his captains Anseric, Ermaric and Siseric. The first made Toribio think of a duck: small, stocky and round-bellied, his long neck wound about with a thick tawny beard. His face was characterised by a fine network of tiny red veins, eloquent of his devotion to the local beer. The second of the three was of similar stature but slightly slimmer. He had a broad, warty forehead and long black disorderly hair. Several of his teeth were missing and his right cheek was scarred where an axe had bitten into it. Siseric, on the other hand, was tall and thin, and what remained of his hair was going grey. He was the only one whose face expressed serenity and assurance, maybe because he was the most senior in age and experience.

Petro was asking what had become of the messengers sent to the Vasconians.

"They set off the day before yesterday, my lord," replied Siseric.

"Maybe it is too late. We should have sent them sooner. I told you so!", broke in Anseric.

The Duke looked at him with irritation, but did not reply. Meanwhile, Toribio had spotted his father, taking a nap on a nearby bench, alongside the brothers Liuva and Teudiselo, who were also dropping off.

But he did not see Bartuelo and there was not an Asturian present. Maybe, he thought, they were already committed to defending the lower walls.

His uncle immediately noticed Gunderic, who was walking heavily towards him. He also saw his nephew, but did not have time to address him.

"What news do you bring?", he asked his general abruptly.

"They are firing large numbers of projectiles, but they are not very large. We lost several dozen archers and engineers to the first volley, and the tower *inter meridiem et occasum solis* has been hit, but the walls have not been breached. I have concentrated the Asturians behind the battlements of the first circle on the left. Our archers are stationed behind the defences to the right. So if the enemy tries to set up ladders, they will be stopped immediately, and if they fall back on the tower *inter meridiem et orientem*, they will be confronted by Bartuelo's reserves.

"Well done, but what if they use battering rams?", asked the Duke.

"I have had three rows of pits dug behind the second gate, well furnished with pointed stakes."

The Duke congratulated him, then found time for his nephew.

"Welcome, Toribio. You are witnessing the start of a heroic defence. Pray that one day you will be able to tell your grandchildren the story", he said, provoking some sniggers among his officers.

"And now give me a hand. You can begin by rousing your father. Not even the thud of catapult stones has disturbed his sleep!"

Toribio laughed, observing the innocent expression on his father's face. He was sleeping open mouthed, leaning against his shield with its lion emblem. Toribio went over to him, removed his helmet and ran his hand through his hair, still thick with dust from the previous day.

Hernando opened his eyes and began to reprove him, still in a daze.

"By the patience of the gods, where have you been, little vagabond?"

For Toribio, it was as if the father he had known for years was back, the father who had greeted him in front of the fortress at home, a month earlier, when he had returned from the Pico Blanco.

But it was only a fleeting impression.

"Is Valerio well? Have you had enough sleep?", were the gruff old man's next hurried questions.

Something had definitely changed. In his earlier life, the old Judge from Valle would never have shown concern for the health of a monk.

CHAPTER XXIV

FIGHT TO THE DEATH

At daybreak they all heard it: a sinister sound echoing from peak to peak of the Cantabrian cordillera. The pale moon was fading in the brightness of the new day. The air was crisp, but already fragrant with the scents of summer.

On the walls of the first circle, the ranks of Visigoth archers waited anxiously, watching the restless cohorts of Saracens drawn up in vast numbers on the open ground before them. Fearfully they eyed the giant siege towers the enemy was preparing to move into position and the hundreds of scaling ladders borne on the green, black and bluish tide of soldiery that stretched away to the horizon. From the wooden parapet of the south-eastern tower, Bartuelo encouraged the five hundred Asturians manning the defence works below him, with Fruela at his side.

Duke Petro and his lieutenant Anseric observed the enemy from the bastion of the central gatehouse, peering through loopholes under a heavy shingled awning. Ermaric was stationed further down on the south-western tower. General Gunderic commanded his officers from the battlements of the second circle of walls, while Siseric looked on from above the gate of the third circle, flanked by Hernando and Toribio. Liuva had been sent to command a maniple of cross-bowmen concealed behind the walls of the fourth circle, while his brother guarded the fifth circle with an infantry detachment. The ordinary people had disappeared into cellars and underground passageways.

A few moments of silence followed the long blast on the Saracen horn. There was a hush in the enemy ranks as a group of beturbaned horsemen dragged forward a white shape, almost to within range of the archers on the walls.

"La ilaha illa Allah!", they shouted, leaving the lifeless body of the elderly bishop in the light of the rising sun.

This was the ultimate affront—the humiliating gesture of intimidation many had been fearing.

"We will avenge him!", murmured Duke Petro through gritted teeth.

Then the front ranks of Saracen infantry began to advance with their ladders. In the midst of them, mounted on a white charger, rode a horseman in a large black turban, his face concealed by a purple veil. Tariq son of Ziyad has decided to lead the attack in person. Raising his right arm, he yelled "Allah Akbar!", and his troops began running frantically towards the city walls.

At the same moment, Duke Petro brought down his right arm. Anseric waved the eagle flag and Ermaric gestured to show he had received the signal. He in turn lowered his arm to unleash a volley of arrows that blotted out the sun. The Berber infantrymen were cut down in droves, their small wicker shields affording little protection from the force of the long Visigoth arrows. Many were hit in the neck or stomach, but they were soon replaced by others and large numbers managed to approach the walls and heave up the first ladders.

These assailants were stopped by a second volley of arrows, but still to no avail: hundreds more barefoot Berbers ran up in support of the first wave. They wore light leather helmets, tied below the chin and wrapped around with white turbans. From the rear, the Arab archers, too, loosed off clouds of arrows towards the central battlements. The Berbers began to climb the ladders. When the first of them were a few arms' lengths from the crest of the wall, the Asturians hurled their javelins. Many of the attackers were hit in the chest, others received glancing blows. A few made it to the battlements, where they had to contend with the Visigoth pikes and Asturian axes.

Bartuelo was madly barking out orders. Fruela had clambered down the tower ladder to help his companions on the walls. An enormous fellow in blue leapt in front of him and began swinging his mace. Fruela parried the first blows with his shield, then managed to get a thrust in under the leather skirt protecting his abdomen. Another Berber fell foul of two sword-wielding Asturians and soon his head was severed. Fruela ran along the wooden walkway, which was already drenched in blood and covered with the bodies of men killed by the first enemy arrows. The noise was deafening. The Asturians halted this first attack with ease. In less than half an hour, they had accounted for at least a hundred Berbers. They heaved the dead bodies over the walls, unhooked the scaling ladders and hurled them back to the ground.

Tariq's captains then gave orders to the Arab archers, who bent their double-S bows and aimed at the towers. Too late: with lightening anticipation, Ermaric had his men fire off their ballistae. Large projectiles weighing up to a hundred pounds crashed down, decimating the masses standing close to the walls and, further to the rear, the archers themselves. Terrible cries arose from those whose limbs had been crushed.

Tariq was not dismayed, but ordered a second attack. At this point Ermaric gave orders for the oxybeles to discharge their huge arrows from the lowest windows of the main tower. The wicked projectiles shot forth with devastating force, some skewering as many as three men. But their accuracy was limited, and the distance was too great. Many of them buried themselves in the ground close to the outer wings of the enemy cavalry, barely frightening the black-caparisoned horses. Tariq smiled and ordered his archers to fire again. The south-western tower was hit by a cloud of missiles. Some of the engineers were killed at their arrow slits, others on the walls themselves. Ermaric himself took an arrow in the shoulder.

Then the enemy made a second attempt to scale the walls, at least five hundred Berbers clambering up the rungs of fifty or more ladders. The struggle for the battlements was intense. It took an hour for Anseric's Visigoths and Bartuelo's Asturians to stop them this time. But stop them they did. By this time the sun was high in the sky, marking the third hour of the day.

Gunderic followed developments intently from his position on the second circle of defence works. He had four hundred Visigoths under his command. A further three hundred were stationed behind the inner walls. This meant that eight hundred men, including the Asturians, were defending the first circle, but the Saracen attacks were beginning to take their toll, especially among the Visigoths in the vicinity of the south-western tower.

At the fourth hour, Tariq ordered his men to bring up the siege towers. It was still too soon to approach the walls, but they could be advanced to just outside the defenders' range of fire. The Berber general then told his men to stop firing.

"What does he think he's doing?", asked an officer close to Petro.

"He's taking his time, trying to find the best place to bridge the wall", replied Anseric, the squat captain with the long red beard.

"Hm, I'd like to know how he intends to go about it", murmured the Duke.

They did not have to wait long for the answer. The Saracen ranks opened up and a powerful battering ram protected by its own roof trundled towards the city gate. There was no preventing it. The men manoeuvring the ram were well protected inside their wooden shell. The siege engines also juddered forwards again. Petro gave orders to prepare the poles for warding them off. Immediately dozens of his men gathered on the battlements to raise the enormous forks used to grapple with and overthrow the towers, as soon as they came within range.

But it was all a feint on Tariq's part. Suddenly the Saracen catapults opened up with monstrous jerking motions. In a few minutes, all the towers of the first and second circles were hit by enormous rocks. The roof of the south-western tower was stove in, forcing Ermaric to order his men to abandon it. Not even he had anticipated this turn of events. The defenders now massed on the central section of the wall became an obvious target for the Arab archers. Ermaric tried to reach the bastion guarded by Petro, but was hit by an arrow in the neck and died instantly. Dismay took hold of his men; they had not even been able to comfort him in his final moments. Petro and Anseric saw their old companion die just a few yards away, looked each other in the eye and swore bitterly.

Meanwhile another attempt to scale the walls had begun. This time the Berbers reached the battlements in large numbers, as projectiles from the catapults rained down on the second circle. In a few minutes dozens of them had squeezed their way over the walls. Petro yelled at his men to resist them with their long pikes and not waste time in sword play, but many were already engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Bartuelo managed to kill three of his opponents. Fruela ran to help him but was stunned by a blow from a mace. His Berber assailant was about to finish him off, but Bartuelo threw his axe and struck the man between the eyes, saving the boy's life. Then an arrow penetrated the chain mail protecting Bartuelo's right shoulder and the pain stopped him in his tracks.

Seeing this, Fruela was possessed by a blinding rage. He drew his dagger and ran to the battlements to stab any face that presented itself. In this way, he killed at least five men, smashed the heads of a further two with his mace and stunned another who was still clambering up the ladder, plunging him back into the void below. He then returned to assist his leader. Bartuelo plucked the arrow from his coat of mail and ordered

the few remaining Asturians to withdraw to the south-eastern tower. Here he loaded more lances onto the ballistae and brought them to bear on the walkway, clearing it of all who had got so far. He then ordered the few remaining archers to direct their fire at any stragglers still on the ladders. They thus managed to halt the third Saracen attack, with some three hundred lifeless bodies left on the walls.

Crows and vultures were already circling overhead. Petro's trumpeter sounded the retreat and the Visigoths followed the Duke and Anseric down the bastion stairs and up through the city streets to the second circle of walls. But Bartuelo ordered his Asturians to remain where they were. The gate was still shut fast. Maybe there was still hope. In a few hours the Saracens would break it down with their battering ram. But they, too, had lost quite a few men, maybe five hundred: not many out of seven thousand, but enough to make them pause for thought. Tariq raised his left arm, the horn sounded again and the blue and green tide withdrew behind the firing line. It was now past noon. The walls of the first circle were steeped in blood. The south-western tower was damaged beyond repair. In front of it lay a carpet of Saracen and Christian dead. The vultures could feast undisturbed.

"But what is Bartuelo doing? Isn't he coming?", asked Gunderic.

Petro jumped up onto the platform below the roof of the bastion to get a better view.

"I don't understand. The orders were quite clear. He should be here by now", replied the Duke.

"That man is raving mad. And they tell me he is wounded!", added Anseric.

"We've already lost Ermaric. We can't afford to lose him, too", cried Petro.

Gunderic hung his head. Ermaric had been his best friend. They had grown up together and Gunderic had taken him to Cordoba with him.

Petro sensed his sorrow. "I don't care if we all die. I shall defend my people to the last drop of blood!", he said, to which Gunderic assented in silence.

At this moment they heard the Asturian trumpet.

"What is he up to now? He really must be mad!", exclaimed Anseric, as they all peered out through the arrow slits.

From their vantage point it was impossible to see what was happening beneath the walls of the first circle, but they could make out the front ranks of the Saracen army. To their great surprise, they saw that Bartuelo of the Arcadeuni was making a sortie. The young man with the three-tufted helmet was charging the Berbers in front of the siege towers. The impact echoed back like a dull thud. Four hundred men, armed to the teeth, leaped like wild beasts on the wavering shields of the Berber troops. The clash lasted for some twenty minutes, then the Asturian trumpet sounded again. The sky was filled with volleys of arrows that swooped in and disappeared behind the first circle of walls. Finally, they heard the clanking chains of the central gate. The Asturians had returned.

A few minutes later, a frail figure with a triangular face presented himself to Petro. He was weeping.

"He said that was how he wanted to die!", said Fruela, to the amazement of the old warriors.

Petro laid his gloved hand on Fruela's shoulder.

"Today you have learned the importance of listening to your elders", he said. "But that commander of yours will be remembered as a hero!"

The others nodded. Only one hundred Asturians had made it back with Fruela.

"You take command of them. You are now promoted to centurion. Take them all to the third circle and tell my brother-in-law to give them water and bacon soup!", ordered the Duke.

Then he turned to his captains: "It's going to be tough, but I'm beginning to think we shall win!"

Anseric opened his arms wide. Gunderic said nothing.

Four hours passed. The sun was still fairly high in the sky and over the city absolute silence reigned. Petro and his men remained glued to the loopholes of the gatehouse, taking time out only for a frugal meal of bacon and bread spread with honey. No one spoke. Within the third circle, Hernando and Toribio made sure Fruela and his men took some refreshment, distributing the food some girls had brought down in baskets. Surgeons attended to the wounded. Fruela had his head bandaged, where the Berber mace had opened up a cut above his left temple. Messengers ran throughout the city, making their way to the inner defences, where Liuva and Teudiselo silently checked over the munitions for ballistae and cross-bows.

"Where is Flavius?", Fruela asked Toribio.

"Good question. I haven't seen him since yesterday. I thought he was with you."

"No, no one saw him at the first circle", replied the Asturian.

"Maybe he is among the temple ruins, praying to his gods", suggested Hernando.

Toribio was dumb-struck. Here was his father referring to the ancient gods as if he had no part in them. Hernando read his thoughts and showed him a chain with a Celtic cross he was wearing round his neck, along with the malachite pendant.

"Who gave it to you?", asked Toribio.

"Let's say an old Byzantine friend of mine . . . Maybe you know him", replied his father, and they both laughed.

At the tenth hour, the bells for vespers rang out from the churches of St. Eulalia, St. Luca and, in the very heart of the city, St. Firminus, followed by the singing of worshippers gathered in the basilica of St. Eufemia. Toribio and his father prayed together for the first time in their lives, kneeling behind the battlements. Fruela joined them, with many of his soldiers. Then silence returned. Not until the sun was about to set was it broken by a mighty thud.

"The battering ram", murmured Hernando.

The first blow was followed by a further twenty, which shook even the wooden planking on which they stood. Then they heard a great crash as the main gate of the first circle splintered, then a hellish din of shouts and hoof beats. The Saracens were in. The houses were quickly broken into and pillaged. Some were torched. But the enemy found not a living soul: the citizens had all deserted the place.

The black rider who entered on his white charger was no longer wearing the turban and purple silk veil over his face. Tariq ibn Ziyad was now clothed in a pointed golden helmet wrapped in a white scarf. Through his leather visor, he scrutinised the bastion of the second circle. He was tense with frustration and in a furious rage.

Behind his arrow slit, Petro chuckled with satisfaction. The terrible general had fallen into his trap. His siege towers were of no use to him now. It was impossible to bring them up into the city. Archers were of no use, either: there were too many roofs in the way. The city's most effective defence was in fact the two-hundred-yard belt of houses and

other buildings erected between the first and second circles of walls. This was the thick skin of Amaya, tending to neutralise the force of an enemy attack. If they had continued to defend the first circle, the siege towers would have breached their defences, they would have lost most of their men, and the city would have fallen into enemy hands.

The stony-faced Berber again examined the wall along its whole length and consulted with his officers. The ram used to smash the main gate was too large to pass through; they had had to leave it outside. So he gave orders to bring up the lighter catapults and ballistae. His engineers installed them at the corners of houses, out of range of the Christian archers waiting for them on the walls. The two sides were separated by an enormous sloping lawn four hundred yards wide.

The catapults went into action again, lobbing rocks at the walls and terraces, smashing battlements and parapets. Finally, they turned their attention to the lateral towers, but Petro bided his time with his six hundred Visigoths. The defences here were not so strong, but much higher than those of the first line of defence. The spaces between the battlements were closed up with thick wooden boards and a slate roof protected the walkway behind them. Not a single face was visible from below. Yet the Christian defenders were all there waiting, silent and motionless—and much fresher than their now exhausted Saracen opponents.

The projectiles thrown from the catapults smashed the roof at various points along its length and opened up some breaches high up in the vicinity of the south-eastern tower, but nothing more. Tariq lost patience at this point and unwisely ordered his men to attack. A thousand hurled themselves towards the walls carrying dozens of ladders. Petro gave the signal to open fire. The archers removed the protective wooden boards and aimed into the throng. A terrible slaughter ensued! The Saracens were not able to raise a single ladder. Hundreds lost their lives on that wide open stretch of grass as the sun was setting.

Tariq ordered a retreat and consulted with his captains again. Then he had a better idea. It was still daylight when another wooden battering ram, its head at least five yards wide, was brought up the driveway leading to the second gate. The Visigoth archers followed its progress, ready to fire on those manoeuvring it, but the Arab bearers were suddenly surrounded by a platoon of Berbers holding aloft the long shields of Visigoth soldiers who had fallen at the first circle. At the same time, a group of kneeling archers began firing from long range towards the defences, forcing their

opponents to take cover as the ram advanced. The operation lasted several minutes. Then the Arabs, protected by the tortoise, began swinging the beam of the ram and making contact with the gate.

Duke Petro was taken by surprise but did not give up hope. He knew that Gunderic had prepared the ground inside the gate. He therefore ordered his general to remove five hundred men from the wall, take up position behind the gate and wait for the enemy to break in. Then, with Anseric, he vacated the bastion.

"Let's go up to the Temple of Jupiter. We'll wait there to see the outcome of this second round", he said.

The light was fading when the Saracens managed to break through into the second circle. The tortoise broke up and the enemy soldiers used their maces and swords to clear away those parts of the doors that had survived the attentions of the ram. Behind them were massed some three thousand of their companions in arms. Hundreds were clothed in light body armour, mostly of leather, over blue linen tunics. Many more wore heavier protection, though still of leather, and tunics of green wool. The Berbers were typically dressed in small white capes, the Arabs in long black overcoats. A few moments later, the Berbers threw themselves, yelling the name of Allah, through the breaches in the gate, jumping over the wreckage and raising their wicker shields to face level.

But they did not get far. The front ranks were immediately swallowed up by the concealed pits and skewered on the stakes Gunderic had set in place the day before. Those behind them tried to retreat, but were pushed forward by the press of bodies at their backs. The Visigoth archers then began a concentrated fire from their positions on the steps of the Temple of Mars. The Saracens fell in waves, each time Gunderic's centurions gave the order for a volley. They did not miss a single one. In a few minutes, at least two hundred of the attackers had been shot dead in the bottleneck. Their bodies collapsed one upon another and soon formed an insurmountable heap of weapons, shields and bleeding flesh.

At this point, one of Tariq's officers signalled to the Arabs not to follow the Berbers, but to bring up ladders. Three hundred of them managed to scale the deserted walls and take the bastions and towers. From these positions, they began to loose thousands of arrows in the direction of the Temple of Mars. In response, the Visigoth archers retreated behind the temple columns, while their companions began to fire the ballistae that

had been set up in the square in front of the Temple of Minerva. The heavy engines were already targeted on the walls and caught many Saracens on the central bastion and the structures that snaked round the circular walls of the south-eastern tower.

The Saracens were forced to run for cover in the south-western tower. Some of the archers reached the platform at the top, but were met by fifty Visigoth warriors armed with axes and broadswords. Once again, the Saracens had been confounded by Petro, who had calculated that taking the upper platform of a tower via the internal stairways would prove impossible. The battle raged on and it was easy for the Visigoths on the higher level to make short work of the straggling groups of Saracens as they emerged from behind the internal walls of the stairway.

At the same time, five hundred defenders charged the enemy forces that had managed to cross the line of pits, now filled with corpses. The hand-to-hand struggle which ensued lasted for a good half hour, interrupted occasionally by groups of Visigoths on horseback, who swooped down from the temple approaches at great speed, crushing all in their path. Tariq immediately understood the infernal mechanism that was preventing him from advancing and ordered his engineers to concentrate the fire of their catapults at mid-height on the south-western tower. The structure collapsed after about fifteen minutes, bringing down with it the Visigoths stationed above. Many Saracens scrambled over the ruins and broke into the second circle by this route. Hundreds more poured down from the walls they had managed to scale and attacked the main body of Visigoth troops from either side. There was chaos for ten or twenty minutes, until Gunderic ordered the three hundred or so remaining Visigoths to retreat to the Temple of Jupiter. It was here that the final battle for the second circle took place.

Five hundred mixed Arabs and Berbers hurled themselves at the flight of steps, yelling "Allah is great!", only to be pushed back by Christian warriors wielding their swords and shouting the name of Jesus. On both sides, faces were contorted and twitching with rage and tension, eyes blinded by the madness of battle. Arms rose and fell, drew back and thrusted, unsynchronised, to the sound of clashing metal and the softer impact of weaponry on flesh. Faces ran with blood. Heads and limbs bounced, rolled or skidded down the blood-slippery steps. The trunks of the decapitated were strewn like empty sacks around the great temple braziers.

The Berbers charged with their javelins; the Visigoths laid into them with their pikes. The Arabs cut and slashed with their scimitars; the Visigoths replied with broadswords and axes. Those who had lost their weapons used their shields, or even their helmets, to smash the white-turbaned heads of the soldiers in blue. Anseric was now buried under a heap of three bodies, a lance planted in his bulging gut.

Meanwhile, Gunderic had rejoined Petro under the central pediment.

"There are too many of them. We can't last long!", yelled the blond general, soaked in sweat, helmetless, his breastplate encrusted with blood and dust.

The Visigoths were down to less than fifty men, while the Saracens continued to come on. They would soon be joined by thousands more. Petro wondered if they would have time to withdraw into the third circle. Maybe he had been wrong to wait so long. But then fate took a hand.

An enormous white charger thundered from the atrium of the ancient temple, carrying the last of the Romans: Flavius, son of Marius, wearing a golden helmet that reflected the slanting rays of the setting sun.

"For the glory of Rome!", he cried, raising his magnificent rectangular blue shield and urging his horse down the steps. His javelin skewered two Saracens at a stroke, the projecting point striking sparks from the granite pavement.

Wielding his sword, he struck off four heads and amputated three arms. The Saracens facing him were shocked by this sudden apparition and wavered. Time enough for Petro and Gunderic to beat a hurried retreat through the temple precincts and enter the narrow street leading to the third circle. Flavius dismounted and took on ten opponents single-handed, disembowelling them one by one with his short thrusting sword. Then, as he unleashed his fury on the next, he received a mace blow to the right shoulder.

Barely shaken by the impact, he turned and saw a tall Arab warrior aiming a scimitar at his neck. He ducked to avoid the blow, then ran the man through above the pubic bone. The man cried out in agony and collapsed. Then twenty more Saracens were upon him, attacking from all sides. He managed to kill four and wound a further seven, but lost his sword in the process. So he defended himself with his dagger, and finally with the rim of his shield, until he was run through with a javelin, right in the middle of his breastplate, between the bosses depicting Juno and Jupiter.

Flavius fell to his knees and prepared to receive the coup de grace. But the Saracens had mysteriously drawn back. As if in sacred awe, they made space around the Roman and watched him expire without intervening. Thus died Flavius, son of Marius, at sunset on that day in May, last hero of a legendary empire, his gods deprived for ever of their power.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FALL OF AMAYA

The third line of defences was much lower: a mere wooden palisade erected on a stone base. The towers at either end were square, also constructed of wood. Here Siseric had gathered two hundred archers armed with longbows and positioned them on the three floors of each tower. They crouched behind low balustrades reinforced with iron and copper shields to reduce the area vulnerable to flaming arrows, their helmets just visible. Many were city youths who had received only a few weeks' training, but there they squatted, ready to spring up and plant their bows between their feet. They should be impregnable, unless the Saracens brought up their siege towers but, as Petro had foreseen, this was a remote possibility.

Siseric quickly opened the gate with the help of three men. Petro and Gunderic scraped through just in time: seven heavy lances buried themselves in the barely closed doors, fired from ballistae which the Saracens had set up on the terrace of the old Roman baths. Then the second circle was invaded by at least three thousand men. Petro lost no time, but bustled up the stairs of the gatehouse to the look-out position. Here he found his brother-in-law and nephew, together with Fruela, whose Asturians had been sent to get some rest in the basilica of St. Eufemia, where much of the population was still at prayer.

Around the third hour of the night, the Saracen catapults again began to rain down debris. Nothing was excluded, not even the heads of Visigoth and Asturian soldiers.

"They are trying to break our morale", muttered the Duke of Amaya, helmetless and bathed in sweat. "But we shall give them a hard time!", he added, still furious at the loss of Anseric and Ermaric.

Hernando and Toribio said nothing, intent on watching what was happening on the nearby palisade. Gunderic was in charge of the right wing of the defences, Siseric of the left.

Pandemonium had meanwhile broken out in the streets of the city. Many people had come out into the open, only to be crushed by the Saracen projectiles. The roof of the presbytery of St. Philippus had been destroyed and the apse of the church of St. Eufemia was on fire. People were running desperately in all directions, but most congregated in the avenue leading to the basilica, which was protected by some tall Roman buildings and so less exposed to enemy fire.

An hour later, the Saracens brought up ladders for the first time, but the manoeuvre proved fruitless. The entire palisade was lit by thousands of torches: not even a mouse could move unobserved. They were easily stopped by volleys of arrows from the archers on the towers.

"I'd like to know how they intend to get through this time!", exclaimed Petro.

His brother-in-law and Toribio did not know what to say. Petro was no longer his usual self. His face was distorted, his large eyes bulging out of their sockets. His belly heaved like a drum under the thick coat of mail that reached down to his heels. He uttered oaths and obscenities, giving orders left, right and centre, urging on his men to the point of giving them kicks up the backside.

"I told you to bring up the ballistae, not the onagers . . . idiot", he bellowed at an artillery officer who had misunderstood his orders. Then the Saracens attacked again with the battering ram. But this time there was not much room for manoeuvre and they were decimated by the archers.

"Come on, then, come on, you damned African demon! Come and taste my blood, if you can!", shouted the Duke, leaning out over the parapet of the bastion, restrained with difficulty by the strong arms of his brother-in-law.

But this time there was no sign of Tariq.

"Where are you, you cunning ape?", yelled the Duke from the defences, like a man drunk and devoid of reason. All before him had suddenly fallen silent. An hour crept by with no further developments. No one moved in the light of the torches, except for the Saracen wounded, groaning and thrashing on the ground.

"I don't like this silence", broke in Hernando, but at that very moment Toribio turned towards the Temple of Minerva, his eye drawn by some luminous shapes.

"Look, father! Look over there!", he exclaimed.

The Judge put his eye to the loophole to see for himself.

"What the hell is that?", he asked, surprised to see hump-backed forms moving towards them, lit by torches. The answer was soon clear. An intense barrage of trumpeting rent the air, making their blood run cold.

How could they have forgotten? The elephants advanced ponderously up the temple avenue. On the back of each was a small tower accommodating five or six archers. While still a few hundred yards from the palisade, the archers bent their double-S bows and arrows rained down by the hundred, like fireflies in the night air.

"Put out the torches, quickly!", cried Petro and sent messengers to Siseric and Gunderic.

But it was too late. Within minutes the towers were on fire and the Visigoth archers obliged to come down onto the palisade. Here many were hit and Siseric was one of the fallers, pierced to the heart. There were at least a hundred elephants. They spread out along the palisade, the riders grappling the defence works with ladders and light ropes. Hand-to-hand fighting began again behind the battlements, where a hundred or so Visigoths were gathered.

"Fruela, listen carefully", cried Petro. "Run to your men in the basilica and order them to follow you to the last line of defences. At the fourth circle, stop and tell Liuva to bring the artillery and cross-bows into play as soon as the Saracens are within range. Then find Teudiselo and tell him to open the gate and let the people escape by the stairway leading to the Eagle Pass. Teudiselo knows the way through the mountains. Tell him his task is to escort the refugees to Juliobriga. They should get there some time tomorrow. Then give Liuva time to join you, find horses and ride without stopping to Cangas, to Pelayo's palace! Now run, boy, run!"

Fruela tore off his heavy armour and ran down the stairs. Petro sent another messenger to Gunderic, with orders to join him at the *domus ducalis*. Then he, too, made his escape, accompanied by Toribio and Hernando.

Meanwhile, ten riderless elephants were charging the gateway of the third circle. The animals reared up on their hind legs and began slamming against the doors. In a few minutes, the chain broke and the doors burst open. The Saracens entered in a frenzy, only partially halted by the few

Visigoths awaiting them. The people fled from the basilica and poured into the fourth circle. But the slow ones were overtaken by their fast-moving enemies, who had replaced the troops weakened by the previous day's fighting. Women, old people and children were massacred without mercy. The Saracens took pleasure in slitting their throats. Many girls were raped in the sight of their loved ones, then put to death with them.

Houses were set on fire, the basilica invaded. Benches, tables and stools were thrown in the air. The marble altar was defaced, the ciborium and wooden crucifix above it chopped to pieces. The monks who had refused to leave the church were impaled on lances, which the Berbers lashed to the transept balustrades. Some were hanged on the slender columns of the ambos from which the epistle and gospel were read. Finally, the invaders shot dozens of flaming arrows at the coffering of the wooden ceilings of nave and aisles. In moments the whole building was in the grip of the flames.

At the sixth hour, Petro, together with Hernando and Toribio, reached his palace. Here, on the threshold, they bumped into Gunderic. Toribio was pleased to see that his old friend had escaped, but Gunderic himself was in the depths of despair. Not even after the battle of Rio Gades had he felt so distressed. Yet he shed not a tear. The tall majestic officer looked with tenderness on the young Autrigonian. He understood that this was the swan song of the Visigoth people, but he did not want to seem to be losing his nerve. Petro, on the other hand, was furious and could not stop mouthing oaths.

The four of them entered the deserted vestibule and ran along the long solemn corridors to the steps leading to the cellars, where Teodosinda was waiting with her little court. The Duchess was huddled in a corner, sitting on a low stool beside an enormous terracotta amphora, the top of which almost reached the ceiling. At her feet lay a jade casket, decorated with agate and cornelian. It contained the family jewels.

"Do you really have to take that, too?", asked Petro in irritation.

"There are my mother and grandmother's bracelets and necklaces—treasures that have been in the family since we had to abandon Toulouse. They were given to my ancestors by the Empress Galla Placidia."

The old Duke looked at her but did not reply. This woman with the ivory face and blue eyes deserved respect. It was not a matter of greed, but

of devotion to her kith and kin. So he ordered the few remaining servants to conduct the choir boys and his wife's maids to the fifth circle, there to join the citizens Teudiselo was escorting to Juliobriga via the Eagle Pass. Weeping, Teodosinda kissed each of the boys on the forehead, then the servants took them away.

This left only Gunderic, Valerio and the Del Valles. The Duke turned to them:

"All right, now we are all here, I'll tell you what I intend to do. Behind this amphora is the door to a long passageway which leads through the mountains and out into Val Misteriosa. The journey will take several days, but I have decided to take my noble lady to Valle, dear brother-in-law, so that your people can look after her, given that she is soon to give birth."

The Judge could not hide his amazement:

"You did not tell me this excellent piece of news, Petro."

"You are right. It is a wonderful thing, and I should have told you when we were still at Cangas. But I did not have time . . . but anyway, now you know. Toribio will soon have a cousin and maybe we shall all live together in a happy and peaceful kingdom."

The Judge looked at his son, then at Valerio and Gunderic.

"May God protect him, then!", he concluded and knelt down before Teodosinda. The Duchess stroked his right shoulder and added: "With your people, brother-in-law, I shall feel more secure."

"And so we shall have more time to muster as many men as possible among the Asturians, given that the Vasconians have not lent us any support", added her husband in his loud voice. "Then we will march them all to Cangas to help Pelayo. What do you think?"

"An excellent proposal, brother-in-law. You can count on me!", declared Hernando, as Toribio looked on proudly, but then a shadow came over his face.

"You said Val Misteriosa? But don't you know the caves of those mountains conceal dangerous mysteries?"

"What the Judge says is true!", broke in Gunderic. "No more than a month ago, I stopped for a night in the woods nearby and I swear that I heard the most bloodcurdling noises. Are you sure you want to go that way?"

"We have no choice, Gunderic. It is the shortest route. Let us pray that God will work things for good. I have no fear of ghosts . . . I have

experienced far worse problems with the living!", replied Petro, gesturing to the others to help him move the amphora.

It took a little time, but the five of them eventually managed to shift the base of the tall cobweb-covered vessel and clear the door giving access to the passageway. The door itself was high but very narrow. On the keystone was the following inscription: *Omnis enim qui male agit odit lucem, et non venit ad lucem, ut non arguantur opera eius; qui autem facit veritatem venit ad lucem ut manifestentur opera eius, quia in Deo sunt facta.*[1]

They all understood the meaning but, strong in their faith, had no fears. Petro extracted a rusted key from the inner pocket of his tunic and inserted it into the lock. The turning of the wards seemed to echo behind the mould-encrusted panels. Then the door swung open and they were struck by a sudden blast of air. Before them was a narrow, precipitous stairway stretching out of sight. Raising a torch, the Duke of Amaya invited the others to follow, and they steeled themselves to descend where no one had ventured for hundreds of years.

In the meantime, Liuva had received his orders from Fruela and given instructions to the defenders of the fourth circle. The walls were lit by two rows of torches fixed on the battlements and at the small two-mullioned windows just below the projecting cornice at the top of the wall. These windows corresponded to a mezzanine floor where the best archers could lie on their stomachs and shoot their cross-bows with deadly accuracy to a distance of two hundred feet—the perfect weapon for close-quarters siege warfare. Other archers were stationed on the battlements above them, but with normal longbows.

At intervals of every ten or so crenellations, the wall projected outwards to form small terraces. Here Liuva had positioned ballistae and oxybeles capable of firing balls of granite or spears to a distance of one thousand feet. The lateral towers were much higher and more slender than those of the lower defence works, almost pinnacles in contrast. At the top, there was no roof but a circular platform on which three or four soldiers at most could be stationed. Liuva rightly thought it was pointless to send men to such heights. The towers had been built as look-out points for sentries.

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[1] Bad men all hate the light and avoid it, for fear their practices should be shown up. The honest man comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that God is in all he does (NEB).

It was preferable to concentrate his men, especially the archers, in lower, less vulnerable positions.

At the same time, the people of Amaya, or at least those who had escaped the invasion of the third circle, were now about to evacuate the city, guided by Teudiselo, Fruela and the few officers who had survived the earlier attacks. Holding torches in their gauntleted hands, the powerful Visigoth warriors with their ankle-length coats of mail and flashing helmets shed light on the ancient paved way accessible from the middle level of the last tower on the north-western side. This tower backed onto the mountainside and was connected to the rock-hewn stairway by a short stone bridge. The people moved over this fragile structure without daring to look down into the abyss on either side. Fruela's men, cloaked in their wolf skins, were already on the other side, pointing out the rough, narrow pathway and helping the children and old folk to make the ascent step by step.

When the Saracen horn sounded for the fourth time, it was still dark, maybe the tenth hour of the night. Many turned to view their city for the last time. Amaya was in flames at various points and the towers of the lower defences no longer stood proudly erect. However, the temple columns were untouched and the pitched roof of the church of St. Luca still intact. The sky was lit up by flaming arrows and projectiles, revealing the final agony of that ancient Roman *oppidum*. But the reliefs of the imperial divinities that adorned the metopes of the temples were not so much as scratched by the storm of flying missiles. It was as if the city had decided to die on its feet, staring the enemy in the face under the sacred gaze of its classical gods and more recent saints. As he watched the flames creep up to the temple pediments, Fruela thought of Bartuelo, who had been proud to fight and die for so famous a city, and of Flavius, whose image he associated with the gravity of those ancient monuments.

"Courage, Fruela, don't let up now!", Teudiselo exhorted him from a few steps below, carrying a pair of blond, plump-cheeked children under his arms. "The future lies ahead", said the red-haired giant with a smile. "Leave the past behind you. We can't go back in time. We have to look forward!"

Fruela was struck by the cheerful faces of the two toddlers. It was if they enjoyed being carried along in this fashion, not at all frightened by

the disaster unfolding behind them. So he returned Teudiselo's smile. Of course, he thought, the future lay with innocents such as these.

Liuva's ballistae had done their deadly work. The projectiles cut through the mass of Berbers who approached the walls, attempting once again to raise their siege ladders. The attack did not last long, however, because Tariq ordered a retreat after the third volley from the Visigoth artillery. Instead, he went to work again with his catapults, which had been brought up at the last moment. And then the elephants arrived. The Visigoth archers did their best with their cross-bows, hitting several of the riders and some of the infantrymen who advanced behind them tortoise-fashion. But eventually the battlements and walkways became a raging inferno under the increasingly accurate fire of the Arab archers, and the unbearable heat forced many of the Visigoths to take refuge in the lateral towers. Here they received the full attention of the Saracen catapults, which in less than an hour reduced both towers to rubble.

Liuva then ordered his men to retreat to the fifth circle and, with barely fifty survivors, made for the tower giving access to the rock stairway. They fled in haste—the final act in the bloody fall of Amaya.

At first light, the Saracens broke into the fifth circle and their commanders marched along the driveway to the White Palace, bearing the standards of their various tribes. At last Tariq was in the great hall of the Officium Palatinum. The room was totally deserted. The Berber general took a long look at the flags hanging from the walls, the animal heads, the long banners bearing the crismon symbol.

"So, you've finally made it, my friend!", came a sharp dry voice from behind him. The small man who had approached so silently was wearing a long purple tunic and a dark coat spangled with precious stones. His face was delicate and clean-shaven, with the most modest of noses set between lively eyes.

"Yes, Julian, at last we can say that Allah is also lord of Cantabria!", replied Tariq, with a smile of satisfaction, continuing to survey the ancient symbols of power.

Julian of Ceuta contemplated the lofty vaulting of the room, then let his own eyes run over those mementoes of Visigoth glory.

"And now you have the victory, what will you do?", he asked.

Tariq seemed to be expecting the question.

"We shall head for the Asturias, to flush out the last rebels from their mountain hideouts. We shall set out tomorrow, when everyone has taken some rest."

"What? Don't you intend to complete the conquest of Cantabria?", asked the Byzantine count.

"Of course. But for the time being Amaya is all we need. It is the only fortified city, as far as I know. I have sent a Syrian scouting party to explore the mountains and valleys beyond the Ebro. We shall see what they have to report, but I believe the lands in that direction are poor, inhabited by peasant farmers . . . not of much interest to us."

"But what about the ports: Porto Vereasueca, Porto Victoria, Flaviobriga?", asked the Byzantine, a trace of annoyance in his voice.

"Abd El Aziz, Musa's son, will take care of them", replied Tariq indifferently.

"As you wish . . . So you will soon be joining up with Musa?"

"No", replied the general from Tangiers, still examining the symbols on the Roman standards, which alternated with the mullioned windows. "We shall march up from the south, to take that scum of infidels from behind!"

"When will you attack?", asked Julian again.

"We shall wait for the new moon, in the hope that Allah will send us favourable summer weather", replied the other, lifting his hands in an attitude of prayer.

"And then?"

"Then I'll stop! For three years I've been wandering these Iberian lands in obedience to Emir Musa and Caliph Al Walid. I hope that after so many victories they will allow me to return home for a few months. It is too long since I saw my wife, and I would like to play with my children. But what about you, Julian? Will you still be on our side?"

The Byzantine avoided the eyes of this man with whom he had undertaken so much.

"I don't know, Tariq. I would not want our friendship to come to an end, but . . .", and here he paused.

"But what?", asked the other gently.

"I, too, have to give an account to others, Tariq. The most recent letters I have received from Constantinople do not foretell an easy future for our alliance . . . You understand?"

The Berber assumed a bitter expression.

"What do you mean? What news have you received?"

"Basileos Anastasio is storing reserves of grain for three years . . . They are expecting to be besieged by your people . . . but there is mutiny among the troops. The Themas have rebelled on Rhodes, and Leo Isauricos, the strategist of Anatolia, is gathering other discontented elements. I foresee that Anastasio will soon capitulate, and the empire will break up."

"Then all you need do is wait, is that not so?", replied the Berber.

"No, Tariq, my friend. I do not want to go down in history as a traitor, and already many people see me in that role here in Hispania. I agreed to help you with the landings to get my revenge on Roderic . . . that dog who polluted my daughter Florinda. And, I am not ashamed to admit it, our alliance has brought me enormous profits. But now my vengeance is satisfied . . . These Goths are finished . . . and a reputation for unreliability in Byzantium would certainly not help me in my commercial dealings. No. It would be mad to continue . . . even for the sake of a great friendship. I am sorry . . . but it's time I withdrew to live in peace in my villa in Ceuta."

Tariq observed his old ally with sadness. For years he had believed him to be a man of greater integrity. But he could not yet assimilate the notion that the many happy times they had spent together had been motivated by commercial considerations. No, there must have been some true feeling in the friendship this man had offered him over so many years. He had seen him capable of hatred and of deep love. He knew him to be a true human being, like himself. He could not have been so easily mistaken.

"I understand and I shall continue to wish you well. Do what you think best. I will give you an escort for your return to Carteia. But swear that you will always be my friend!", implored the Berber.

Julian looked him in the eye. For the first time in many years, he felt tears well up inside him. But he did not allow himself to cry. Tariq, on the other hand, was swollen-eyed.

"I shall miss you", he said.

"And I shall miss you, Tariq ibn Ziyad, but remember that my house is always open to you, should you need it", replied the other.

They embraced, then the Byzantine turned and walked slowly away.

As he reached the middle of the room, his friend spoke again. He turned and saw a smile on the face of the brilliant young Saracen strategist.

"May Allah protect you!", he called out, unsheathing his scimitar and giving him a military salute.

Julian of Ceuta returned the gesture, bowing his head and raising his right arm:

"How blessed you are to have a god in whom to believe! Remember, that is your greatest strength, my friend!"

He then turned on his heel, leaving Tariq alone with his officers.

"But were we not allies?", one of them dared to ask his general.

"No, we were much more than that, good Anbasa . . . We were friends!"

"And are you friends no longer?"

"I would wish to be friends forever", replied Tariq, then, his eyes still on Julian as he crossed the threshold: "But I fear that men of his ilk are under the curse of Allah."

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE HALL OF THE KINGS

The six walked on and on, stopping only occasionally to eat some flat bread, have a drink of water or snatch a few hours' sleep. For what seemed like days they continued in this way, often supporting one another, passing among stalactites and stalagmites of menacing appearance and through damp, rough-walled caverns, seeing only their own shadows.

Petro led the way, taking great care to ensure his torch did not go out. He had brought a supply, all dipped in oil, and plenty of sulphur to light them, but he was loath to waste any, waiting until the one he was carrying was exhausted before lighting the next. He began to have doubts about how long the journey was taking. It was of course the only means of escape, but it seemed the descent would never end, as they followed the narrow steps down, down though enormous, high-roofed caverns.

And no one wanted to trouble him with questions. It was clear the Duke was still in a state of extreme agitation over what had befallen his city. They all preferred to keep quiet, sharing his shame at the way in which Amaya had been surrendered. All they heard was Valerio muttering the occasional prayer as they clambered over stone bridges or squeezed along paths cut into topless rocky cliffs. Silence reigned, apart from the distant gurgling of mysterious underground watercourses in the dark depths below them.

Then, maybe three days into their journey, tired and sleepy-eyed, they came to a vast cavern whose alabaster walls intersected like the sides of a polyhedron, covered in enormous silvery cobwebs.

"Strange", said Toribio. "It looks like an abandoned hall."

Petro cast light on the ceiling.

"Maybe it is true, then . . . the story my grandfather Turismondo used to tell me . . . This must be the Hall of the Kings . . . where the dead still recall the past!"

"Look here!", exclaimed Gunderic, who had broken away from the group to examine the walls of the chamber more closely.

Petro came over and played his torch on an enormous slab of pink alabaster carved with bas-reliefs. They made out a scene from the Apocalypse of St. John: a pregnant woman protected from the flames issuing from the seven heads of a dragon by a shield bearing the image of a peacock's spread tail feathers.

Teodosinda fell to her knees.

"That's it", she said. "It's all foretold in the Apocalypse!", and she began to sob.

"What is?", asked Hernando sharply.

Valerio began to quote: *"There I saw a woman mounted on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten tails. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and bedizened with gold and jewels and pearls. In her hand, she held a gold cup, full of obscenities and the foulness of her fornication, and written on her forehead was a name with a secret meaning: 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth'."*

"But that woman is not seated on the dragon. Rather, she seems to be defending herself from it with our shield!", objected Gunderic.

Valerio said nothing. Teodosinda, who was clothed in similar fashion to the woman, began to cry.

"Take heart! It can't be you," urged her husband.

"Maybe it is a warning for us all", suggested Toribio. "The shield is one of ours, no doubt, but it is not certain that the image relates to the gospel story."

Valerio still kept his own counsel. He did not seem at all keen to launch into an interpretation.

"I think you are all making it too complicated. This is how our Goth ancestors imagined the depths of Evil threatening the life of our people. That is indeed the Beast and it is quite clear to me that in these days it has come from Babylonia, where the heresy introduced by Mohammed is now spreading. That's how I see it", explained Hernando.

The older knights seemed to agree with this simpler explanation, but Toribio was still puzzled.

Valerio remained locked in silence, hands joined and face hidden by the folds of his hood. Teodosinda was still shaken by the vision.

"We'd better go!", snapped Petro.

But when the Duke directed the light of his torch onto the pathway behind them, an image suddenly appeared on a gigantic spider's web at the other end of the hall. The six of them stood rooted to the spot. A handsome young man had materialised on the makeshift screen. He was tall and muscular, wearing golden armour and a breastplate set with bright gemstones in the shape of an imperial eagle. His tawny hair and beard were neatly clipped, his eyes large and turquoise in colour, his nose finely carved like that of a Greek Apollo. He had neither helmet nor weapons of any kind. This is how he addressed them:

"Do not fear my appearing, children of my children. I am none other than the first king of the race of Baltha the Bold, which first emerged seven hundred years ago in the Sea of Ice. My father became a confederate of the glorious Constantine on the day he was given the Onyx Cross. And that emperor granted our people territories and immense wealth for defending Rome from the Alamanns. I was all-victorious and even captured the Eternal City three hundred springs ago but, fearing God, I was loath to destroy the greatness of its churches and the beauty of its works of art. I now see that these people from Babylonia are ruining it all without the least scruple. But do not be discouraged. Follow the way of the Twelve Gemmed Crosses and you will frustrate the plans of the Evil One. My body now lies beneath the waters of the Busento River in Calabria, but my spirit is here with you, in Hispania, since this is the land that has fed us and enabled us to flourish after centuries of desperate wandering. My race has come to its end, but our blood will survive in yours, and one day your children will carry our light very far, farther than you can ever imagine."

As Alaric the Great finished speaking these words, his image began to waver and gradually faded from sight.

The six spectators had hardly had time to draw breath before other images materialised. They saw sumptuous royal palaces, pagan temples crowded with people in festive array, then a woman of sublime beauty, maybe Roman, kissing a barbarian wearing a silver crown studded with pearls. And then this king was stabbed by one of his servants and died in the arms of the woman. Other figures appeared, and a huge map in the background, showing a great empire divided in two and overrun by shadowy demons riding their horses among tribes of people with different features. Some were dressed completely in black and armed with long broadswords; others wielded double-headed axes of a kind never seen before; others had long horns on their helmets; yet others were clothed

only in animal skins and defended themselves with iron-shod clubs and wooden spears.

Then the beautiful woman returned, this time with a Roman general, and together they conversed with a man with a thick beard and gave him the keys of Toulouse. But he disappeared in his turn, to be replaced by an old warrior wearing a broad helmet with golden wings. His beard covered his breastplate, flowing down almost to his hips. His eyes were swollen with a network of red veins, the irises grey as ice. These were the words he spoke:

"You have just seen the greatness of the love between King Athaulf and his wife Galla Placidia, and the tenacity of General Costanzo and the courage of King Wallia, who brought us to Toulouse. Know that I was the hero of the Second Event on the Catalaunian Fields, where the demons who sought to destroy Rome and the beauties of this world were put to rout. I was faithful to the values of the City of God, together with the Franks, Alans and Burgundians, whereas those demons had corrupted our brothers in the West and cousins in the East, and even the descendents of the Gepids. But it was God's will that the Jasper Cross appear on the field of battle when all seemed lost, and be planted and make the earth shake to frustrate those ultimate enemies. And now it is the turn of your cross. Be tenacious as I was in my long reign, and God will reward you, too."

And so the image of Theodoric I faded away and was superseded by a further sequence of events: they saw the removal of Romulus Augustolus and the end of the Roman Empire in the West, while their own people were living happily in Toulouse under new laws promulgated by King Euric. Then came the war against the Franks, led by the Catholic Clovis, and a man of advanced age appeared, crownless and with a tired, bitter expression:

"And so you see why we were defeated on the Vogladensian Plains. It was God's way of punishing me for my heresy against Rome and rewarding the obedience of the King of the Franks. If only I had listened to my subjects . . . there would have been no need for that war, as a result of which we lost everything. But maybe it was to ensure our final migration to Hispania, since Gaul was never to be our true resting place."

Alaric II fell silent and his face, too, disappeared from sight. There followed a further rapid sequence of images: the civil war between Agila and Athanagild with the revolts of Cordoba and Sevilla, and Agila's death at Merida; the Byzantine invasion under the old general Liberius and the

agreement granting them the whole of the southern coastline; then King Liuva's war against the Franks, who had invaded Septimania.

And meanwhile the world was changing and new peoples invaded the lands that had belonged to the Roman Empire. Men with flowing red beards and long, hiltless swords descended into Italy from north of the Alps. Other warriors in terrifying helmets reproducing the features of the human face set sail for the British Isles. Armies continued to clash between the borders of Byzantium and the frontiers of the decadent Sassanid Empire, while in Rome bishops and ecclesiastics came and went and the epistles and writings left by Pelagius and his supporters were consigned to the flames. Finally, the scene shifted to the heights above the River Tagus and a city appeared whose walls Toribio, Hernando and Valerio had no difficulty in identifying. It was of course Toledo, and a new king appeared who had an affable air but severe, deep-set eyes and a fine white beard as rounded as a loaf of spelt bread:

"I am remembered as the king who gave splendour to Toletum and founded the beautiful city of Reccopolis . . . But I remained obdurate in my Arian faith and my son Hermenegild, my favourite and heir, turned against me. He allied himself with King Miro, whom I defeated at the gates of Hispalis, subjugating for ever the Swabians. I should have listened to Bishop Leandro and the pleadings of his stepmother Goswinta, but my pride and power perverted my judgement. So I had him arrested in a church in Cordoba and, though I forgave him, lacked the courage to stay the hand of Count Sisbertus, who eventually had him killed. This is the tragedy of one who refuses to listen to the well-meant counsels of his own sons. Even his brother Reccared pleaded in his favour. I would not listen, and so tainted the memory of a prosperous and glorious reign with the blood of the one I loved most. Now I see that faith sometimes divides rather than uniting, all the more so between a father and his sons. But you will not follow my example. I foresee that your race will grow ever more united under a single faith. Follow the way of the church and all will live at peace."

Thus spoke the great Liuvigild, vanishing into the abyss with tears still in his eyes. Hernando felt as if the king had been speaking directly to him and took heart from the prophecy that he would not behave in the same way towards Toribio.

Meanwhile, another king had arisen:

"I am Reccared and, unlike my father, I understood that religious unity was vital for the peace of our kingdom."

The speaker was a young man whose long black hair was entwined with strings of pearls and small crosses dangling from a golden crown encrusted with emeralds, agates and lapis lazuli. His beard was wavy and brushed to a shine, as is still the fashion among the basileos of Byzantium.

"So I fell in with the wishes of the greater part of our people and since my time the kingdom has been Catholic. I was greatly helped by my good friend Leandro of Hispalis, despite the fact that he had many times been obliged to flee to Rome or Byzantium to escape the wrath of my father. He had been the great friend of my brother Hermenegild, and so he proved to be for me. It was thanks to him that I convened the first Council of Toledo and for ever gave the hearts of the Spanish people to the Church of Rome. But many tried to prevent me, the Arian bishops and nobles first and foremost, from Emerita to Septimania. I had no mercy on them, and even less on Count Sisbertus, who had murdered my beloved brother. And therefore be severe yourselves, children of my children, on those who set traps or use the sword to kill the faith."

This handsome king concluded his speech and, like the others, vanished among the delicate threads of the spider's web. Further images then flickered across that unusual blackboard: the lynching in the streets of Toledo of the tyrant Witteric, who had tried to restore Arianism, and his abject burial in a common grave; the return of good kings such as Gundemar, who convened the synod which made Toledo the religious capital of the kingdom; the reign of Sisebut, the writer king, and scenes of his deep and loving friendship with Isidoro, younger brother of Leandro, who had become bishop of Sevilla. They saw the books this cultured king had written in Latin hexameters on astronomy and the lives of the saints, but also the terrible sufferings he inflicted on the Jews, and scenes from the long war against the Byzantines waged by his headstrong general Suintila.

Then Suintila himself became king, put down the revolt of the Rucconians and the Vasconians, and brought the war with the Byzantines to a triumphant conclusion, with the common people acclaiming him and kissing his feet. But envious nobles and bishops protested at the heavy burden of taxes and the loss of their privileges. And so an army led by the nobleman Sisenand, helped by the Frankish King Dagobert, descended on Toledo and confronted Suintila's troops near Saragossa. The poor king

abandoned by everyone, captured and excommunicated, was shown living out the final years in a monastery, purging his sins.

Then came the glorious years of the IV Council of Toledo, since when kings have knelt before bishops, rather than bishops before kings, and they saw a new class of aristocrats, great landowners, haughtily scrutinising the conduct of their king. Then there was the notorious winter when King Chintila ordered the conversion to Catholicism of all the Jews, the merry faces of the people celebrating in the streets of Toledo and the sorrowful expressions of the many Jews who reluctantly submitted to the new rites.

This was followed by years of prosperity under the young King Tulga, when an educated populace sought to live a more sophisticated way of life. Schools were founded and Roman codices studied once again, and the new class of young Visigoths learned Latin in order to exercise the professions of judge or government official. Then one of their proud fathers completely filled the cobwebby screen, and his small puffy face assumed a serious air. Frowning severely, he spoke as follows:

"Now you have seen Visigoth society in its heyday, but be aware that those times will never come again. It was in vain that I formulated new laws, and in vain my son Recceswinth completed and codified them. Our successors were not equal to the task and allowed themselves to be corrupted by the very nobles and bishops my son and I had sought to discipline for the future health and prosperity of the Visigoth people. However, my Balthi bloodline was not totally forgotten. I was the father of both Teodofred and Fafila, who were born from different women and did not know themselves to be cousins. But you know who their sons were."

He said no more and disappeared.

Petro and Gunderic looked at each other in amazement. Clearly this was King Chindaswinth, author of the *Lex Visigothorum*. But they would never have dreamed that he was the grandfather of both Roderic and Pelayo, nor that the two of them were second cousins.

"This is a clear sign!", exclaimed Gunderic. "The blood of Baltha is crying out to us. We must recover our unity and march forward together".

Petro nodded his agreement, his large green eyes sunk in distant memories. "You are quite right, Gunderic. King Ergica, the father of King Wittiza, was a cousin of King Wamba, who succeeded King Recceswinth but was not of the Balthi line. When Recceswinth died, I was only three years old and I do not know exactly what transpired. But I do not believe Wamba was an evil king. They told me he had made too many enemies

among the nobles and bishops, whom he had taxed to finance his wars against the Vasconians, and a civil war with Duke Paul. In the end, he was falsely accused of poisoning someone and removed from office. I was only eleven, but I remember it well. The nobles had grouped themselves around Count Erwig and had already called on Julian, Bishop of Toledo, to administer the *ordo poenitentiae*.

I was there, at the bedside of the old king, together with my father Gesaleic. My father was very attached to him . . . and there was also a monk dressed in white—strange how I have not thought of it for years—fat and with a disgusting piggy face. When the monk approached Wamba's bed, the king suddenly woke up, and we were all amazed, or rather frightened. But just then our Bishop Julian arrived—a holy man if ever there was one—and ordered the white monk to be gone. The monk gave him a hateful look but obeyed, mumbling a language that was foreign to me. Then the Bishop helped the king to get up and encouraged him to recover his throne. But Erwig's nobles rebelled and would not accept his return, so Wamba abdicated and retired to a monastery. Then no more was heard of him!

But now I remember having seen that strange white monk in another context: he was often in the company of Bishop Sisbertus and the widow of King Erwig, Queen Liuvigoto, at the time of Sunifred's revolt against King Ergica, then always at the shoulder of young Wittiza. Strange . . . I never really knew who he was, and only now am I aware of having seen him on so many occasions!"

"Maybe I have the answer, uncle!", broke in Toribio, who had worked out the connections between the various events. "His name is Oppa. He turns up everywhere and is a servant of Evil! His aim is to confuse the minds of the powerful and so prevent the Church from doing its work and bringing in the Kingdom of God."

"Do you believe that fellow Astasio who came to Cangas was him in yet another guise?", asked Petro.

"I'm certain of it", replied his nephew.

Hernando and Valerio also nodded their agreement.

"But wasn't he kidnapped by Munuza's men when you both went to Xixon?", asked Petro.

So Toribio explained what had happened at the Monsacri, of which there had been no time to inform his uncle, such had been the pace of events. The Duke listened attentively, then sat down on a rock, profoundly disturbed by the way these phenomena were linked.

"If that is the case, we are really in the hands of the lords of Evil", he said disconsolately.

"Of course, Toribio's reasoning is correct. I myself was there on the Rio Gades, when this monster Oppa transformed himself into a serpent and devoured our poor King Roderic whole!", added Gunderic, remembering that horrific scene.

But Petro was still trying to make sense of things.

"The rumour was that Wittiza ordered the death of Teodofred, King Roderic's father, and went so far as to strangle Fafila, Pelayo's father, with his own hands, when he was Duke of Tuy. And there are straightforward explanations for these events: Teodofred had rebelled, inciting the city of Cordoba against him, and Fafila was killed by Wittiza because he did not permit him to touch his beautiful wife. But what if that were all fiction, lies dressed up as truth? And suppose those demons, Oppa and his minions, were really behind all these events?", speculated Petro.

"But why did they pick on us Visigoths? Could they not have sunk their claws into some other people?", asked Gunderic.

"That I really don't know. But it's certain we are in a fine pickle!", replied the Duke.

While they were thus thinking out loud, Teodosinda noticed some more reliefs carved on the wall nearby.

"Look here!", she called.

Petro got up and came over with the torch, so that they could all see. The carving depicted a woman wearing a red *colobium* and a purple outer garment, similar to the lady they had seen before, but now she was mounted on a white charger. She was facing round holding a bow and was about to shoot an arrow at a turbaned warrior robed in black who galloped alongside her on a red horse. Lower down were depicted two other riders, one wearing a monk's habit, the other a younger man in a green jerkin. Behind them rose the threatening shape of a black angel.

"But that is us!", exclaimed Toribio.

"Yes, that is certainly me!", added Teodosinda.

"And that warrior is a Saracen . . . Look at his sabre!", pointed out Hernando.

Then they found yet another scene, representing a skirmish between black angels and white, and below it twelve crayfish.

"The false prophets!", exclaimed Valerio. "Those crayfish are them: the demons sowing chaos to prevent God's ultimate victory!"

Toribio was about to repeat what St. Jacobus had told him, but stopped himself just in time. He had promised: he could not discuss it with anyone.

Teodosinda burst into tears." Why me? Why us? How will we manage on our own to fight so many enemies?"

"You have finally arrived at the truth", came a hoarse voice from behind them. They turned and saw that another figure had appeared on the screen. This time it was a young man with black hair and fair skin. He wore an iron crown decorated with blue and brown enamelled roses. His shell-shaped plate armour came down to his ankles and over it was a white surcoat, held in at the waist by an eagle-shaped buckle.

"King Roderic! Is that really you?", exclaimed Gunderic, falling to his knees.

"It is indeed me. And I am here to announce that victory is near if you remain united as you have been until now. There is still hope and the Evil one can still be stopped. But you will lose everything if you listen to the advice of his servant. He will try to sow enmity between you all once again, as he did with me and Wittiza's people. But you are able to recognise him: forewarned is forearmed. However, he cannot be annihilated. Evil must pursue its course until the very end, so that the Lamb of Love can truly see who stands with him and who is against him. And this will occur on the day of the Last Judgement, but only if the Diamond Cross is kept safe."

Thus spoke the last king of the Visigoths, before his face began to go out of focus.

"Wait. Please tell us why Oppa has picked on us rather than anybody else", cried Petro.

"We Visigoths have been Rome's most faithful allies. Rome is the mother of our Church and the Evil One has sought to confuse us first of all. The real Oppa was the brother of Wittiza, a good man, murdered in secret by the demon who wanted to assume his likeness. That is why the Oppa in question assisted Sisbertus in his revolt against King Ergica. That Oppa was not his son. It was the very same demon who killed me. But our Father has seen his misdeeds and I tell you it will be hard for him, even after my defeat. The Franks will be the new champions of the faith and one day, not so far off, one of their emperors will for ever change the destiny of this world. Thanks to him, the Church will live for ever and Rome will again be the universal city.

"But if you lose the third battle, none of this will come to pass, and the Evil One will prevent the victory of those who love Jesus. The apostles will be discovered and captured by the twelve demons, and this world will remain for ever in the hands of the Beast."

"And where will the battle take place?", asked Toribio.

The king simply smiled: *"It will be in the vicinity of a lake hidden in the mist . . . but it will be different . . . very different . . . and everything will depend on you!"*.

With these words, the face faded away and vanished among the knotted threads of the cobweb. At this point, a gust of wind caught the web and tore it, causing it to fall in a heap on the ground.

The six were amazed by what they had seen and heard.

"And now what shall we do?", asked Hernando after a long silence.

Petro looked at him for a moment, then seemed to awake from a long dream.

"Air! That is fresh air from the outside world!", he said, referring to the gust of wind that had swept away the giant spider's web. Instinctively, he raised his torch and they all made out a narrow pathway, climbing upwards among the broken rocks.

"Quick, our salvation is at hand", said Valerio by way of encouragement.

The six of them went as fast as they could and, a few hours later, having squeezed their way through narrow tunnels and passages, finally came out into the open on a large rock at the foot of a mountain.

A grandiose scene was spread before them. The entire Cantabrian cordillera, with its majestic pink peaks, seemed to welcome them with outstretched arms. They heard the crashing of a waterfall and, looking beneath the rock, discovered a mountain stream running down in spate from the slopes of the mountain.

"What waters are these?", wondered Hernando.

"Father, I am surprised at you! Don't you recognise them?", replied his son.

The others looked at him expectantly, except for Valerio, who had already worked it out.

"The River Ebro!", exclaimed the youngster from Valle, a broad grin on his face.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GRACE CHILD

As if by magic, Asfredo, Ederedo and Witisclo suddenly appeared. The six could not believe their eyes. The horses—white, brown and tawny—pulled up and went down on their knees for them to mount: Valerio and Teodosinda on Witisclo, Toribio and his father on Asfredo, Gunderic and Petro on Ederedo.

"This is another sign of God's favour", boomed Petro.

"And now, follow me", cried Hernando, digging his heels into Asfredo.

The group galloped off down the barren track. It was a fine sunny day, but there was nobody in sight. They crossed the floodplain of the Ebro in a flash and in the late afternoon began climbing a cart track which brought them within sight of the jagged indentations and wooded heights of the Pico Blanco—where barely a month earlier Valerio had gone with Toribio to found a church. As far as Toribio was concerned, it could have been a century ago. And, of course, the sight reminded him of his mother. He had wanted to build that church in her honour. His father had not agreed that her body be buried, but had insisted it be burned on a funeral pyre, following the age-old pagan rite. Toribio therefore wanted a place where he could pray and feel close to his mother, even if he had never discussed this intention with his father. He looked for Valerio among the other riders. The monk was right behind him. He knew exactly what his friend was thinking and they exchanged smiles.

Meanwhile, the newly dubbed Count of Valle had reined in his horse.

"By all the creatures of these valleys, what has been going on down there?", he exclaimed, pointing to a collection of dark shapes among the ferns and clumps of yellow flowers.

Approaching cautiously, they made out human forms and clothing, but nothing stirred. Toribio remembered the dead bodies they had discovered a few days earlier at the gates of Amaya. But this time they were different:

bare skeletons clothed in lightweight armour and green tunics, the skulls encased in crescent-moon helmets.

"They're Saracens. That's quite obvious!", declared Petro.

"Quite so . . . possibly Syrians. They have the same sort of daggers as we came across near Palencia", added the Judge.

"But what are they doing here? And why isn't there a scrap of flesh on their bones?", asked Gunderic, as he guided his horse among them.

"Let's get out of here. I fear for my people!", urged Hernando suddenly, spurring on Asfredo.

So they did not dismount but quickened their pace up the mountain road, which now followed the contour of a steep hillside.

After another ten miles, covered in single file, they finally rounded a huge bell-shaped rock and were halted by a warning arrow that buried itself in the ground a few yards in front of Hernando's horse.

"Stop right there or we'll kill you!", croaked the breaking voice of a young lad holding a rudimentary bow.

Hernando smiled.

"Good day to you, Avane, son of Auga son of Taeda. Have you forgotten what your master looks like?"

The lad examined the horseman with the leather helmet and lion effigy on his shield, and immediately recognised the boy with the green jerkin mounted behind him.

"By all the gods! Is it you, *domne* Hernando and *domne* Toribio?", he exclaimed in wonder. "Quick, come here all of you. The master has returned!", he shouted. And from behind the rocks and boulders littering the pass the heads of at least seventy young lads appeared.

Most of them were clothed in short jerkins, skimpily protected by leather jackets. A few were wearing *loricae lamellatae* far too big for them. Some had leather headpieces; others old Gothic-style helmets with circular brims or antique Roman calottes. Few of them possessed metal swords. The majority were simply armed with sticks, clubs and javelins. Such a gang of scarecrows could hardly have stopped the hundreds of Syrians whose remains they had found a few miles from the pass.

"Tell me, Avane . . .", asked the Judge, "what exactly happened on the Plain of Yellow Flowers?"

The young lad raised his arms to heaven.

"It was a lion . . . enormous. He was red and spat fire from his jaws. We arrived after he had left. They had all been incinerated!"

Hernando and Toribio glanced at each other. Then Toribio looked at Valerio, a shiver running up his spine.

"Is it another sign?", he wanted to know.

The monk grinned, a sparkle in his eyes.

"Yes, Toribio. God's grace is upon us", he said with conviction.

The others were all thrilled to hear of the miracle.

"Let's not lose any more time, then", said Petro. "We have heard what our kings had to say. Now we must follow their instructions. The hour of redemption is nigh."

Hernando was deeply moved, Gunderic excited. Even Teodosinda seemed happy at last. But at that very moment the Duchess felt a sharp pain in her lower abdomen . . . then another. She began to groan, clasping her hands over her belly, and suddenly went pale. Valerio was immediately sensitive to what was happening.

"Quick! The Duchess is going into labour. We must hurry!"

Without further delay, they spurred their horses up the mule track. Some of the young lads formed a procession and ran along behind them. Avane and the others stayed to guard the pass. One began to beat an enormous bass drum. Another lit a beacon. Soon other beacons flared up along the crest of the cordillera towards the north-east, and they heard the deep notes of other drums in the distance.

As they descended towards Rio Tondo, peasant huts thatched with reeds and straw came into view. Many women and children had been drawn to their thresholds by the echo of the drums and waved as they went past. A few hours later, moving at a gentle trot to ensure that Teodosinda was not badly shaken, they came within sight of Attilio's inn. Gunderic recognised it immediately, and Toribio remembered it as the place where they had separated a month before, when neither he nor his father was yet convinced of the rightness of their mission.

Now they most certainly were. Roderic's words still rang in Toribio's ears as he thought of the terrible fate of the last Visigoth king, recounted by Gunderic in that very same tavern. The sight of the remains of the elm tree that had been struck by lightning distracted Toribio from these dark thoughts, enabling him to appreciate the applause and joyful shouts of the dozens of villagers who had gathered at the door of the inn. Some of the men had only just returned from their fields, still sweating and

dusty. There were painfully thin, dark-skinned old men waving their straw sombreros, women with shawls over head and shoulders, and countless happy, bare-foot children.

The six of them tied up their horses and accepted the little jugs of cool watered-down wine that Irunia offered them.

"Welcome back, Judge", said her husband Attilio, who had combed and smoothed down his hair for the occasion. "Won't you stop for some biscuits and a few of our olives?"

"No, Attilio, we must hurry on. This good lady is expecting a baby."

"May God protect her", called out an old man, stroking the horse of the elegantly dressed foreigner.

"God bless her! God bless her!", responded the small crowd that had gathered in the shade of the great elms and had certainly not recognised the Duke and Duchess of Cantabria. Immediately some of the boys rushed off to bring the news to Valle.

After a few words with Attilio and some of the elders, the six slowly resumed their journey, eventually crossing the Roman bridge and entering the village. Here, too, many people had gathered, having heard the drumming in the woods and been alerted by the boys who had got there before them. There must have been a good two hundred people: young men in arms from San Petro and San Bartolomeo, San Michel and Santa Monica, as well as the young folk from Valle itself and their elders. Hundreds of eyes were fixed on the riders accompanying the Judge and his son. Many had seen Valerio before and greeted him warmly, but no one recognised the bear-like man in the long coat of mail under the white surcoat and red cloak, though the more observant noticed his eagle-shaped belt buckle. And there was no lack of speculation about the mysterious lady in scarlet, whose suffering face was barely visible through her veil. A noisy crowd was assembled in front of the family fortress, where Lucio and Lario were waiting on the threshold, together with Decio and Anna, tears in their eyes.

Hernando dismounted first and embraced his servants. Then it was Toribio's turn. Anna wanted to kiss him.

"You were always the most handsome, but now you are also the strongest of our young men, *domne* Toribio", she said, hugging him to her chest.

Toribio was moved: Anna was no older than him, but he felt all the warmth of a maternal embrace. It seemed to communicate the love of a person who wants you to be older than you are. He caressed her hair and let her go.

Meanwhile the crowd was preparing to light torches. Many were carrying panniers full of loaves and flat bread. Others arrived with long poles from which hung freshly slaughtered lambs and piglets. Two hefty adolescents were unloading large vessels of oil and wine from a nearby cart.

"But why all this extravagance?", thundered the Judge.

"It's for the banquet in your honour, sir", replied Decio, in his usual respectful tones. "I immediately thought of you when I heard the drums. Then the boys arrived who had seen you at Attilio's inn. You can't imagine the joy we feel at your return", concluded the corpulent old butler.

"I say amen to that!", burst out grandma Amagoya, who had elbowed her way through the crowd. "Lord love us, wherever have you been?"

Hernando looked at his mother, such a tiny creature in her orange tunic, adorned with bronze jewellery down to her elbows and garlands of flowers around her neck. She still had the most splendid brown eyes and the full lips he remembered from many years before: when his father was delayed in returning from Flaviobriga, they would sit by the fire and she would tell him tales of Phaedrus she had learned from her uncle Momo of Pamplona. Hernando stroked her forehead. Maybe he had never loved her so much before. Maybe he had never really known what it was to love a mother.

But now he felt differently. All his ambitions, his craving for success, his thirst to make it in life were gone. His heart was no longer distracted by those things. And he realised what great wealth he had neglected all these years. This was his mother. These were his people. He looked again into the deep, still-youthful eyes of that frail creature and felt the urge to shout for joy. He caressed her again, but then remembered the present emergency and explained to her that Teodosinda's time was near and her skills as a midwife were needed. Amagoya immediately called Anna and, taking the Duchess in hand, they led her into the fortress. Valerio instinctively followed.

The Judge climbed the steps leading to the door to address the crowd.

"People of Valle", he began calmly, as his servants gestured for silence. "We have witnessed events that none of you can possibly imagine . . . but

the story is far from over", he continued, raising his voice. "Our elders will remember the visit of this knight, little more than a moon ago", he said, casting his eye over their wondering faces. "This is indeed Gunderic, who first informed us of what was happening in the outside world", he explained, pointing to the burly Visigoth general. "But few of you will remember this other knight, who came to visit us twenty or more springs ago, when I was married to his sister".

The people fixed their eyes on the bewhiskered warrior standing erect on his left. There were a few moments silence, then from the ranks of the elders came a spreading ripple of applause. The most senior among them had at last recognised the Duke of Cantabria.

Hernando smiled at his brother-in-law and invited him to speak.

"Thank you, men and women of Autrigonia, for your hospitality and the joy with which you have welcomed us. But my brother-in-law is quite right in hinting that we bring bad news," he began sadly, while the elders were still congratulating themselves on having recognised him. "Amaya has fallen!"

You could have heard a pin drop. Rumours of what was happening in the wider world rarely penetrated those remote valleys. The news that the capital city of Cantabria had been conquered by the Saracens was a terrible blow indeed. The fact that it was announced by the Duke of that city in person made it all the more poignant. Dismay spread through the crowd, and the silence was broken by a crescendo of murmurs and whispering.

"But do not lose heart", continued the Duke. "Even though the Saracens are at the gates, we shall defend ourselves and we shall never, never let them pass! Our men are already engaged in defending the Asturias. The chiefs of the Cantabrian tribes have declared their support for our cause. And it will be my business to defend you, with the help of Duke Pelayo and Count Sancho of San Emeterio. If your young warriors also enlist in our ranks, it will make our task all the easier", Petro declared.

The muttering began again. The youths from San Petro and San Bartolomeo seemed excited. The time had come for them to prove their worth. Some began banging their swords on their shields. Others presented arms with their spears and shouted: "Long live our Duke!"

Petro looked on with satisfaction, then let Hernando speak once more:

"There will not be a banquet tonight", he said. "The time is not yet ripe and I do not want to irritate the gods with pointless celebrations".

Then, clicking his fingers in the direction of Lucio and Lario: "Let only the elders enter. We shall eat a frugal meal of bacon and olives. The meat you have brought can be shared out among the people, especially the families of our young recruits. Now let's go in, because I have an important announcement to make, to your elders first of all."

So saying, he gestured to his servants to follow and all the guests went into the fortress to sit around the fireplace in the main hall. Seated at the head of the table, Hernando introduced the elders one by one to Duke Petro. Gunderic sat nearby, Toribio on his right. The servants presented the bowls of food and jugs of wine. Then the Judge rose and spoke as follows:

"You all know, dear elders, that I have revered our gods for many years. However, the journey I have made in recent weeks has changed my mind."

The old men were evidently surprised. Toribio watched his father with trepidation, anticipating what he was about to say. He was not even aware of the weariness taking hold of his legs; only his eyelids occasionally betrayed him. His father, his uncle and Gunderic had also been tested to the limit by the many days of hurried journeying and sleeping in snatches, but they did not show it, either.

"You know how faithfully I prayed to Erudino. I even visited his altar at the beginning of this mission", continued the Judge, standing before them, resting both hands on the table and regarding them one by one.

"Well, I have experienced things that have changed my way of thinking!", he went on more forcefully. "I now believe these gods are no more real than the shapes of the trees and the peaks of the mountains we imagine at night, when our eyes cannot make out anything in the darkness."

At these words, the elders gave a start.

"I believe that the true light of our life is faith in the one God, who is the father of Jesus and, with him and the Holy Spirit, is both *Unus et Trinus*!"

This declaration was met with further signs of uneasiness.

"Yes, you have understood my meaning, elders of Valle. Today, I who have been your Judge for so many years ask you to accept my conversion to the Church of Rome and to allow me to fight for her with as much determination as I would for you and for my own family!", pronounced Hernando.

The elders were in a state of shock. Some expressed amazement, others outright disapproval. But then one of them spoke up:

"Why be so surprised, brothers of Valle, at a leader who gives heaven the glory after fighting so valiantly for us all?"

It was Taeda.

"Hernando has already shown us his lion's heart and now he has come to reassure us that he will protect us to the bitter end. Does it matter if our Erudino is superseded by this new god?

Hernando looked at the old man with gratitude.

"Good Taeda, as always you prove faithful in supporting me in my office. God bless you!"

Some began to applaud, but then Caelia asked the following question: "Will this new god bring us good fortune and protection as Erudino has done for so many centuries? Will he defend us from our enemies, from plague, famine and sickness?"

Then Viama, oldest of them all, rose and tapped his stick on the edge of the table.

"Listen carefully, you who are younger. I was alive in the days of Reccared and I saw many conversions among the Gothic kings and dukes of Cantabria. Often I wondered if this new god was better or worse than Erudino, or even Jupiter or Mars. Today I see that his miracles are reaching out even to us. Taeda is well aware of what happened on the Plain of Yellow Flowers. He learned of it from his nephew Avane, when he came to tell us of the appearance of the red lion. What else can this be than a sign of new things in heaven?"

"Our Viama is right", confirmed Taeda. "That lion is a miracle such as has never been seen before, not even in the days of the war against Emperor Octavian. I believe Hernando has seen signs which lend credence to the new faith, and I will follow him!"

The other elders consulted among themselves, then Caelia spoke again:

"I find it difficult to believe in this one god, but I will do as our Judge tells me. If he says so, it is good enough for me!"

There was further confabulation, then Petro intervened. A respectful silence fell: this was the Duke of Cantabria speaking. Petro told them what he had seen and heard in the caverns of the Val Misteriosa. Their faces lit up with passion and dismay as Petro repeated the exhortations of the Visigoth kings. By the end, not a single elder was unconvinced.

"So be it!", exclaimed one of them. "If these prophecies are true, let us welcome the new kingdom of the Church of Rome!"

The others applauded enthusiastically. God's will had been done: Valle was on the way to being a Christian community for ever afterwards.

At that moment, a shout was heard from the nearby corridor.

"The child is born, and it's a boy!", announced Decio, bursting into the room.

Petro looked at his brother-in-law and nephew. Then they all turned towards the door, as Valerio came in with a bundle in his arms. In it was swaddled a chubby little baby with big blue eyes, which immediately began to yell. Petro ran to take charge, kissing the child and lifting him up in full view.

"God bless this wonderful day! This is a sign of the grace about to be poured out on our beloved Hispania after so many misfortunes! This child, I tell you, will one day fulfil all our hopes for the future", he proclaimed with great emotion.

Toribio looked at his father again.

"And don't be surprised that this event follows so hard on the heels of the declaration of your conversion!", he found the courage to say.

Hernando could barely hold back his tears. Clearly, this chain of events was willed by a being far greater than themselves. It had been planned in heaven.

"Long live, Hispania! Long live our future king!": the words escaped him, despite himself.

The elders all rose and lifted their goblets.

"Long live, Hispania! Long live our Duke and our Judge!", they chorused.

Then Petro went with Valerio to visit Teodosinda, who was still in the care of grandma Amagoya, and Hernando dismissed them all, after announcing that he would be leaving next day with the younger warriors for Cangas de Onis.

That night, Toribio had trouble getting to sleep. At short notice, the village folk had organised a party in honour of the new-born child and he was disturbed by the sound of tambourines and castanets, as well as the glow and crackle of bonfires that had been lit in the square below. As he lay there, his mind went over the struggles and adventures of recent weeks: the descent into the caverns of the dead, the fall of Amaya, the

heroic deaths of Flavius and Bartuelo, the tortures he had undergone in Toledo, and the appearance of the red lion.

And finally, he thought of Agasinda, picturing her smile and glowing face when they had made love together in that long-abandoned church among the Monsacri—the Church of the Angels of Love, as it was most appropriately called! Or so he had been told by Fruela, the youngster for whom no one had had the slightest regard. Toribio wondered if he had already made it to Cangas. And what of Liuva and Teudiselo, the valiant brothers who had been his companions in all those adventures? Had they made it, too? And was Pelayo still there, training his men? Toribio suddenly remembered the Ruby Cross and what Roderic had said: "*a hidden lake, a lake hidden in the mist . . .*" Where could it possibly be? If all the enemy forces were concentrating on the Asturias, that was the only logical answer.

And what would happen then?

Meanwhile, Petro had joined his wife in a small room opening onto the inner hallway of the fortress. There were two beds and, in the middle of the room, a chair pierced by a half-moon shaped opening. Teodosinda lay on the softer-looking of the two beds, wearing a long grey dressing-gown, her hair loose. She was half asleep. Amagoya's fingers were still slippery with oil and she was about to wash them in a large metal wash-basin standing on a tripod.

"A fine, healthy child if ever there was one, and just the right weight", declared the elderly woman, taking the baby from Valerio's hands and setting it down on the other bed.

Petro thanked Amagoya and went over to his wife. Teodosinda raised her eyelids weakly and greeted him with a weary gesture. Petro took her hand in his and kissed it a number of times. She smiled and looked him directly in the eye.

"In this light you look as young and handsome as when I first married you!", she said.

"And indeed I must be if you have made me the father of so beautiful a child", he replied gallantly.

They both smiled.

"He is to be Alfonso, then?", asked the last Duchess of Cantabria.

"Yes, his name is Alfonso!", replied Petro.

Then Valerio dipped his fingers in some oil that stood in a little bowl near the birthing chair and anointed the child on the forehead.

"And may the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit protect you at all times", he recited the formula.

A sudden loud rumbling sound was heard from outside. Petro went out into the hallway and looked around. But there was no one about, and the sky was filled only with stars.

"What was that?", asked grandma Amagoya.

"You heard it, too, did you?", asked the Duke.

"Of course we heard it. It was like the roar of a lion", said Valerio.

Petro looked reverently at the baby.

"Maybe it was another sign of God's infinite grace", he concluded, and went down on his knees to pray.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CANTABRIA AWAKES

At cock-crow, the Count of Valle, Toribio, General Gunderic and the Duke of Cantabria mustered the young warriors who had received them the previous evening—a hundred lads in all, equipped with metal armour and leather headgear. The elders of the neighbouring villages had already sent their best horses, decked out with broad leather collars and bridles with polished brasswork.

Valerio had risen early to give them his blessing. As agreed, he was to remain in Valle with Teodosinda and Alfonso.

"Go with God and do not let anything discourage you!", he said with a smile.

Hernando responded with a warm hug—something that would have been unthinkable a few weeks earlier. But their lives were now taking a different direction, and that morning both knew they were fighting for one and the same cause: the salvation of Hispania and the glory of the new God.

The hundred riders made good speed over the mountains and valleys between Valle and the County of San Emeterio. The drums had continued to send out signals throughout the night, along the valleys of the Rio Sauga, the Megrada and the Pas. The message had reached the summits of the Sierra de Escudo and the mountains of Bishaya, and had been passed on down the banks of the Rio Bisalia, the Salia and the Namnasa. The long horns on Mt. Cilda, Mt. Vindio and Mt. Bernorio, the sacred mountains of Cantabria, were also sounding their deep bass notes. And hundreds of beacons had been lit along the cordillera, spreading the word to the northern coasts.

In the villages, war dances were in progress and the local people preparing a send-off for their strongest young men, calling on Erudino and Mother Earth to protect them. Mothers and sisters donated their jewellery and amulets and daubed their young heroes with war paint. The lads buckled their belts and fastened on their sheathes and daggers. The village

heads handed out weapons and the young warriors knelt down to kiss the feet of their elders, while the children continued to dance and sing without restraint in the light of enormous bonfires.

And so, down along the Rio Pas came the hundred Conisci led by Virone, all painted yellow, carrying hefty axes and long javelins, from which flew orange pennants. In front marched their bare-chested leader, wearing an imposing bronze collar and gilded amulets and anklets. Instead of a helmet, he wore a black headband to tame the mop of curly hair framing his broad, sun-burned face. He carried a large wooden shield with metal edging and an ivory-handled sword.

And from the headwaters of the Rio Bisalia came Talanio's hundred Blendii, also bare-chested but painted in blue, wearing over their shoulders the skins of wolves whose jaws gaped open atop their long flowing hair. They carried small circular shields adorned with eagle's feathers and javelins from which dangled strips of blue fabric. Talanio advanced slowly on his black steed, his face painted with yellow stripes, a necklace of crows beaks gracing his chest.

And from lower down the course of the river came Tridio's hundred Salaeni, tall muscular fellows with strikingly fine features, wearing lambskin-lined leather body armour and helmets decorated with long pheasant's feathers. Their bodies were painted an amaranthine colour, their forearms adorned with silver bracelets. Tridio was clothed in a lorica lamellata over a yellow tunic that came down to his knees, with amber strung around his neck, wrists and ankles.

Marching silently down the valleys of the Rio Namnasa and the Rio Salia came Alia's hundred Avaragini, all in green war paint. They carried long ash bows strung with deer's tendons. Their chests and legs were bare, but their midriffs were protected by leather aprons held in by belts with leaf-shaped buckles. Alia himself wore a black felt hood and a necklace of birds' skulls.

On horseback down the slopes of Mt. Vindio came Turenno's hundred Plentusi, their mounts decked out in gemmed collars and purple satin fringes. They themselves were painted the same colour, perfumed with oil of myrtle and clothed in grey tunics. They carried large round shields and short-bladed hatchets with long handles. Their leader Turenno, also armed

with an axe, was loosely clothed in a bearskin and wore a domed helmet adorned with a pair of long ox horns.

From farther south and east, along the valley of the Rio Carrion, came Atia's hundred Tamarici, black as pitch from head to foot, clothed in thick rams' pelts and wearing two-branched helmets topped with human shin bones. They carried lances twice the length of their horses and great swords with dazzling blades. Atia sat statuesque on his ash-grey horse, surveying the heights of Mt. Bernorio to the west and those of Mt. Vindio to the east, from which the notes of the horn still echoed. He was tall, thin and sinewy, this head of the most feared of tribes, known to drink the blood from the hearts of freshly killed enemies. His amulet was a serpent-shaped piece of onyx.

Finally, in Vadinia, above the Rio Cea and south-west of Mt. Vindio, gathered Doidero's hundred Vadinensi, bodies daubed with a brown pigment and hair encrusted with yellow paste. They wore thick, wide collars made from bronze plates and leather trousers with belts fastened tightly around their impressively muscled bellies. The heads of their war clubs were studded with nails, their shields round and conical. They wore amulets and anklets of alexandrite. Doidero stood in their midst, head and shoulders above the rest, brandishing a pole with flags depicting the gods of their mountain strongholds.

When they reached King Liuvigild's Bridge, the Count of Valle's horsemen were feted by hundreds of people from the neighbouring villages and as far away as Porto San Emeterio. They greeted them with bunches of flowers and laurel wreathes, and together shouted the name of Corocotta, the legendary leader who, in the distant past, had defended the Cantabrian tribes against the Romans.

Drawn up before the bridge, Hernando and his men found Aluane's hundred Congani, in their red war paint and with their long hair tied at the nape of the neck. They wore short leather jackets and wide belts with fish-shaped buckles. Their spears were decorated with red fabric at head and handle, and they carried long, oval-shaped shields. They wore splendid gold bangles round their wrists and ankles. Aluane saluted Hernando, raising his spear above his head, while the people crowding the open space in front of the gatehouse continued to chorus the name of the ancient hero.

Meanwhile, among the soldiers guarding the tower, Toribio had identified the man who a month earlier had examined their papers, only now his uniform was in perfect order. The guards, some twenty in all, suddenly stood to attention, presenting their lances and planting their shields with the Neptune effigy on the ground in a display of martial discipline. Then they stood aside to make way for a squad of black-clad bodyguards, who marched forward and, in turn, stood to attention in front of Petro and Hernando. They, too, then stood aside to make way for an elderly man with a pale, emaciated face.

"Welcome to our city!", said the Count of San Emeterio.

"How good to see you, cousin Sancho!", replied the Duke of Amaya from his more elevated position.

"And welcome to you, too, Count of Valle de Autrigonia!", proclaimed the man with the undernourished features, bowing his head and flapping a bony hand from the sleeve of a threadbare uniform. Hernando replied with a nod of the head, maintaining a serious expression.

"I see that Cantabria is rousing itself from its slumbers. I have received news that all the tribal chieftains are coming down to the road here and will soon be joining up with you in the Asturias", continued Sancho, noting that Aluane and his men had already arrived.

"This is a most encouraging piece of news", replied Petro, "but it is only the beginning. And how about you, dear cousin, will you fulfil the promise you made to Pelayo?"

The Count of San Emeterio shot him an angry look:

"May God burn my tongue and make my eyes start out of my head if I have ever failed to honour a pact with my lords", he declared, evidently vexed.

Toribio observed his father, who could not help smiling. But Hernando knew that Sancho had spoken nothing but the truth. Everyone, not least himself, knew Sancho to be a grasping man, but he had always kept his promises.

"I am sure we can rely on Sancho, brother-in-law", intervened the Count of Valle de Autrigonia. "Do not forget that only a month ago this excellent Count of ours offered to undertake a risky negotiation with the most perverse of the Saracen leaders."

Toribio was taken by surprise. He had never heard his father defend a person whom he had previously held in contempt. He realised that his father really was changing. Only a true Christian would have been so

careful to avoid passing a negative judgement. Duke Petro also appeared to appreciate his comment:

"Indeed, you have always been honourable in your dealings, cousin, and now I see that you have been zealous in putting your garrisons in order", continued the Duke of Amaya, turning to Sancho and pointing out the sentries and archers standing motionless between the battlements of the gatehouse.

"And that's not all", replied the Count. "I have doubled all the coastal garrisons and we are recruiting young lads in every town. My nephew Aurelio has already sent me two hundred. They will need a few weeks' training, but I assure you that by the time we have finished no Saracen will dare think of crossing the Via Agrippa!"

Then, pausing a moment, as if preparing the others for a pleasant surprise, he added:

"And look over there, beyond the bridge . . . Can you see that line of wagons?"

The others looked and saw at least fifty wagons parked on the other side of the river, heavily laden with sacks, amphorae, wineskins and barrels.

"Goodness gracious, whatever have you got there?", asked Petro.

Sancho beamed back: "Far more than I promised you at Cangas: four thousand sacks of flour . . . our own harvest from last year, though it was not the most brilliant of seasons, . . . a thousand sacks of salt, from the Tortosa salt pans, . . . five hundred jars of honey, produced by the bees of Konkana, the home village of those fine warriors you see stationed on the bridge, . . . four hundred skins of oil, from the coast between Tarragona and Barcelona, . . . and finally five hundred amphorae of cider, two hundred barrels of beer and a thousand amphorae of wine from Aquitaine, which I purchased only yesterday from merchants down at the harbour. Will that be enough for you?", asked Sancho, looking from one to another of the four horsemen.

Petro gasped. The others, too, were open-mouthed with astonishment. True, fifty cartloads of provisions would feed the five thousand men Pelayo was gathering in the Asturias for only three weeks, but these were the gift of a man renowned for his stinginess.

Toribio turned to his father: "It really is true, then, the world is changing!", he murmured quietly.

Petro dismounted and took hold of his cousin's hands.

"Today I see a man I thought I had forgotten!", he boomed, energetically pumping his cousin's arm.

Sancho politely freed himself. "And what man might that be?", he asked in his effeminate voice.

"Certainly not the man who was prepared to trouble the echevins of King Ergica in order to win the dispute over the city of Juliobriga!", replied Petro unguardedly, immediately regretting having touched on so painful a topic.

But, against all expectations, the other merely smiled.

Petro blushed slightly and sought to make amends:

"Forgive me, cousin. Sometimes I wish my tongue were under tighter control. But surely you have not forgotten those wonderful days when we went hunting together, when you were our guest at Amaya", he continued, trying to make capital out of the distant past.

Something in Sancho seemed to melt at these words.

"That is true, cousin. Recently I have dreamed of when I was a young man and a guest of your father at Amaya . . . This was a flourishing kingdom then, in the days of King Wamba", he said, buried feelings welling up within. "Everyone thought it would last for ever, and I well remember what fine presents I used to bring you, cousin, and how wonderful it was to sport and hunt together during those summer visits . . . But then times changed, as you well know . . . and maybe that is why I changed . . .", he confessed, breaking off to reflect.

Petro was silent for a moment. "Yes, I well remember how things went wrong . . .", replied the Duke, thinking of the years of decline, after the abdication of King Wamba and the coronation of King Erwig. "But that is all water under the bridge. Now the wheel has come full circle. Maybe this is a new dawn for our people, and your gift comes to me as confirmation from heaven!", declared the Duke, "Thank you."

"Long live Sancho!", shouted Toribio at this point. "Long live Sancho!", proclaimed the four riders. "Long live Sancho!", repeated the crowd, who were now all around them.

So Petro remounted, saluted his cousin again and moved off towards the bridge, followed by Gunderic, the Del Valles and their hundred Autrigonian warriors. Toribio turned instinctively to observe the face of the white-haired old man with the wan grey features. There were tears in his eyes, if he was not mistaken. The old Count met his gaze and raised his right hand with unaccustomed energy, a luminous smile breaking out on

his thin face. Toribio was moved. That smile seemed to cancel an infinity of resentments and prejudices. He smiled in turn and took his place behind the others.

On the bridge, they were met by Aluane who wanted to cross swords with Petro, the traditional form of greeting among Cantabrian chieftains. Petro exchanged a few words with the red-painted warrior, then ordered his men to move on with all possible speed. The Congani waited for the Autrigonians to pass by, then Aluane gave his men the signal to follow at a good gallop. They were followed in turn, and at a much slower pace, by Sancho's fifty wagons, driven by soldiers in black uniforms displaying the Neptune symbol.

They at last arrived, towards evening, at the Asturian border. Along the way, they had been joined by Alia's Avaragini. The green-clad archers from the Namnasa valley had greeted the Autrigonian horsemen and Aluane's red-painted warriors by raising their bows above their heads and excitedly shouting the names of their gods. The others had crossed swords with them, and all had continued their journey, in good order, behind the Duke of Amaya.

When Xosepe saw the three hundred men approaching, he rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming.

"And look over that way, too, good-for-nothing!", screeched the old exciseman's wife, standing at the battlements of the guard tower and pointing out Origeno's hundred Orgenomesci, who had arrived from the banks of the Deva. These warriors were daubed with ochre paint and wore metal scale armour and large copper collars. They were armed with double-headed axes and iron-tipped clubs, and brandished long lances with harpoon-shaped points, decorated at the base with spirals of crimson fabric. Their head-gear consisted of laminated helmets topped with branching antlers. They, too, were covered in a profusion of bangles, amulets and anklets. Origeno was clothed in a hempen tunic under a leather jacket, over which swung a large horse-shaped pendent. He saluted the others by raising his axe, then they all gathered under the vaulting of the entrance to the tower, where a group of girls brought them refreshments: jugs of wine and slices of bread spread with honey.

It was now dark and they needed to stop for the night. Hernando introduced Xosepe to Petro and Gunderic, and the Duke complimented him on the smartness of his uniform.

"By all the saints of holy mother church, I never expected to see you back here, with the Duke of Cantabria and all these splendid horsemen, Hernando!", exclaimed the old exciseman with a sparkle in his eyes.

"Surely you're not expecting us to pay your excise duties now, are you, Xosepe?", asked the new Count of Valle with a withering look. The other pretended to be giving the matter serious consideration, then they all burst out laughing.

"And where should I send this abundance of tax money? To Oviedo for the benefit of the Saracens?", asked Xosepe, and they all laughed again.

"Now you mention Oviedo, have you any news from those parts?", asked Petro, a note of anxiety in his voice.

"What news do you think I might have, my lord? No one tells me anything . . . I am only an exciseman, and what is more on the wrong side of the dukedom! If only I were twenty years younger and manning the defences of Nava! I would show those African bastards a thing or two!", replied the official, grasping the pommel of the stiletto he carried fastened to his belt.

"God willing, there will be no need for you to, dear Xosepe . . . but really, have you no news from Cangas?", asked the Duke of Amaya again.

The exciseman shook his head.

"The only news I have is from the drums and horns that woke me last night. I was expecting some important event, which is why I told my wife to prepare food and wine in abundance. Even at the time of the war with the Vasconians we did not hear such sounds, so I knew that soldiers would soon be passing through. That's the way it is when you are in charge of a customs house."

Petro still seemed thoughtful.

"Why are you tormenting yourself, *domne* Petro? We shall soon be at Cangas, then Pelayo himself will be able to tell us what is happening farther west", Gunderic sought to reassure him, as he bit into a large hunk of cheese.

But Petro seemed unconvinced.

"I'm not easy about this silence. The whole of Cantabria is up in arms, and the same must be true of the Asturias. Is it possible that nothing of

what is happening on the western front has trickled through?", muttered the old Visigoth leader as he loosened his cloak to sit at the head of an improvised table nearby.

"If the war drums can be heard down here, they must also have heard them at Cangas! The important thing is that we show Pelayo that Cantabria is doing its bit", declared Hernando, impatient to get some food inside him.

Petro seemed somewhat reassured, especially now they could smell the fragrance of the hot bread and bean soup that Xusta was serving. So the four knights seated themselves at the humble table and the Del Valles were fed for the second time by that hospitable cook. Then Xosepe led them up to the top room in the tower, where, among heaps of sacks and a store of amphorae, they found four well-stuffed straw mattresses and chests full of clean sheets and soft cushions.

"That was the best I could do in so short a time", said the exciseman, looking a little embarrassed.

But the others thanked him without comment and, having made the beds and prayed briefly together, settled down for the night.

Yet again, Toribio had trouble getting to sleep, excited as he was by the unusual events and emotions of the day. He thought of the change in the way his father related to people and the gentle, human expression he had seen for the first time on the face of Sancho. Something mysterious and wonderful must have accompanied them during their long ride. Suddenly, his breath seemed to come more heavily, as if something magical were pressing down on his chest. He immediately thought of the cross and instinctively felt for it among the folds of his jerkin, but found nothing.

So he prayed to the Virgin Mary, whispering quietly and hoping sleep would come, then he felt his uncle's hand on his shoulder.

"Are you still awake?"

"Yes, uncle. My mind is in turmoil, with so many things happening at once", replied Toribio.

"So is mine . . .", replied his uncle. "But now we have a moment, there is something I want to ask you."

"What is it?", asked Toribio.

"You remember, that night . . . in the cave where the old kings spoke to us . . . There is still something I don't understand . . . Gunderic has asked me, too, but I haven't got the answer . . .", reflected his uncle.

"What is it you want to know exactly?", asked his nephew, slightly anxious.

"You remember the words of Alaric the Great and King Theodoric?", asked Petro.

"Of course I do, they were very encouraging", replied Toribio.

"They certainly were . . . And do you also remember what Roderic said?", asked his uncle again.

"Yes, I do. What is it, then?"

"They spoke about crosses and gemstones, do you remember? I think they mentioned an onyx, a jasper and even a diamond . . . What do you think they were talking about?"

"Toribio said nothing.

"So you don't know, either?", asked his uncle.

"No, uncle!", Toribio replied shortly.

Petro was silent for a long time. "It doesn't matter, nephew. It doesn't matter . . . Now let's try to sleep and may Jesus deliver us from Evil!", concluded his uncle, turning noisily on his mattress.

"Amen!", replied Toribio, with a sense of relief.

Outside, in the dark of night, drum beats were still echoing. And then there was a scraping of hooves and a neighing of horses, and words and orders exchanged in various dialects. The other tribal contingents had arrived.

CHAPTER XXIX

PELAYO BEWITCHED

They reached Cangas as dusk was falling. At the outer gate, they were met by Liuva and Teudiselo. The two strapping redheads greeted them cheerfully.

"So, you've arrived at last!", said Teudiselo, who was still limping from the leg wound he had received in the skirmish near Palencia.

"I knew you would make it, Duke Petro!", broke in Liuva, much impressed by the accompanying host of tribesmen in their war paint.

The brothers were impeccably arrayed and looked fresh and rested. Behind them stood other Visigoth soldiers from Amaya, whom Gunderic recognised.

"God bless you, my valorous lieutenants! I see that you managed to lead some of our men to safety", replied Duke Petro, dismounting and shaking hands with the brothers, before greeting the other soldiers.

"And there are many more than you see here. We have saved at least three hundred. The last of them arrived on foot yesterday. They are resting in the tents that Fafila had us pitch on the green in front of the old Legates' Palace. We also carried out the orders you sent via Fruela: the people of Amaya are now at Juliobriga. I hope they will be safe there for the time being."

"I hope so, too", said Petro. "But why is Fafila giving the orders? Weren't you received by Duke Pelayo?"

Liuva and his brother suddenly went quiet.

"What's wrong? Speak up!", insisted Petro, exchanging looks with Gunderic and the Del Valles.

"Pelayo has not put in an appearance, Duke Petro. We have only seen and spoken with his son . . . He did not even receive Fruela, despite the fact that the boy saved a hundred men from Bartuelo's contingent", explained Liuva, bowing his head.

The others, too, were clearly dismayed. Then, the long scar above his left eye barely flickering, Liuva continued: "The truth is we do not know what to do, sir . . . People are murmuring that Pelayo is sick . . . The

soldiers are tense and anxious . . . We know that Musa's son has joined forces with his father . . . They are already at the gates of Nava and Villa Flaviana!".

To the others, this came as a surprise.

"Take me to Fafila straight away!", grunted the Duke of Amaya. "I want to know what is going on. Obviously, I was right to be worried yesterday", he continued, giving Gunderic a look of reproach. The latter merely pursed his lips.

"You go, Petro. I had better stay with Teudiselo and review my men", said the blond Visigoth general.

"And I'll stay and help our Cantabrians set up camp", added Hernando, intrigued by what he had heard, but anxious to settle his own lads and the tribesmen who had joined them.

"Let me come with you. I want to see Fafila anyway", said Toribio.

Petro nodded and the pair of them followed Liuva, leading their horses.

Along the way to Pelayo's villa, they observed hundreds of men bivouacking on the slopes of the hill on which the old red palace stood. The majority were Visigoths. Many were exercising half-heartedly, doing sword drill or throwing lances at wooden targets. Others were chatting or playing at dice at the entrance to their tents. On the left of the Visigoth encampment, Toribio noticed the Swabians, recognisable by their wide mauve-coloured cloaks, fastened across their chests by large, heavy, rose-shaped buckles. They, too, looked bored. Some were playing chess, others using a grindstone to sharpen their swords. Still others were munching strips of dried meat, sitting silently on stools in front of their tents and occasionally raising jugs of beer to their lips.

"Why this slacking?", grumbled Petro. "These men should be on their way to man the western defences or defend the southern passes. But here they are, sitting on their backsides and doing nothing. What is Pelayo waiting for?", he continued in irritation.

"I quite agree with you, sir. It's days since we received any orders, and meanwhile the enemy is approaching", replied Liuva.

"Doesn't Pelayo know that Tariq's Berbers are also on their way?"

"Indeed he does! Fafila assured me he had reported the fact", replied the lieutenant.

"And what was his reaction?", asked Petro.

"No reaction . . . or so we were told; he seems to be completely withdrawn."

Petro shook his head, then turned to Toribio: "I don't like this business", he said. "It's not like him . . . All will be lost if we delay!"

Toribio was equally dismayed. He would never have expected a situation of this kind after all the trouble his uncle and Pelayo had taken to muster an army among those mountains. The survivor of the Rio Gades was famous for his boundless energy and determination. He was not a man to leave his soldiers for so long without orders.

They soon arrived at the substantial white-painted villa. Hundred of Visigoths and their horses were lined up on the parade ground in front of the building, standing in silence to be inspected by Pelayo's twelve spatharii.

"This is not normal, either!", commented Petro. "Why is he not with his officers in such delicate circumstances?"

At that moment, Fafila appeared on the threshold. The young nobleman with the fawn-like face looked totally dejected. He was unarmed, wearing only his coat of mail, not even his wolf skin. Clearly he had not slept for several days.

"Praise God, you have got here safe and sound!", he exclaimed, running to shake hands with Petro and Toribio. "This is a bad moment. More messengers arrived from Xilo this morning . . . The Saracens have attacked Villa Flaviana and . . . my father is not at all himself . . . maybe a fever . . . maybe he is under some enchantment . . . Come quickly!"

They followed, while Liuva stayed outside to attend to the horses.

Toribio and Petro strode through the empty, desolate entrance hall. Fafila led them through the portico of the peristyle, still lit by the last rays of the sun. As he passed the columns where he had first met Agasinda, Toribio could no longer contain himself.

"Did you manage to rescue Agasinda?", he burst out abruptly.

Fafila was expecting the question. He knew Hernando would have told Toribio about his expedition to Xixon; he also knew that the two of them were in love. But he lacked the courage to tell Toribio the bitter truth. The Autrigonian was about to insist, but they were interrupted.

"Toribio, Toribio, my darling . . . What a joy to see you again at this sad time!", cried Gaudiosa, who had appeared at the door of the *triclinium*, wearing a long black robe, and came to embrace him.

"Agasinda is still in their hands!", she broke out sobbing, finding comfort on Petro's shoulder.

"Fafila, have you told him what you saw?", she enquired of her son.

"I would have preferred to talk about it later", Fafila replied, seeing that Toribio's face had clouded over. "I'm afraid I wasn't successful, dear friend . . . I lost a hundred men, and many Celurnigian farm lads perished on those walls", he continued. "We were on the point of breaking down the gate of that brute's palace, when thousands of Saracen warships put in to shore. Then I knew we had no hope . . . Damn it!"

"And did you see her?", asked Toribio, trembling with fear.

Fafila lowered his eyes and looked at his mother, seeking encouragement.

"Yes, Toribio. I think so . . . She was standing alone, behind the parapet of a large terrace . . . wearing a white cloak and red dress . . . I think she was watching me", he replied tearfully.

"It was her, then! I'm sure of it. She is alive!", exclaimed the young man from Valle, remembering the dream he had dreamed at Amaya.

"But if we lose, it will be the end for her, too!", said Gaudiosa, still in tears.

"That is exactly what will happen if your husband does not come to his senses! Let's go! I only hope he will listen to us!", boomed Petro gruffly.

Meanwhile, through the curtains of the glazed door, Toribio recognised the beechwood table at which he had dined a month earlier. Sitting there, quite motionless, was a tall slender figure wearing a dark veil: Isilde. She sat stock still, like a marble statue. But Gaudiosa was speaking again.

"Quite right, Petro. Come quickly! You go with him, Fafila . . . Try to help him, before it is too late", she said, propelling Toribio forward and pointing towards the portico.

The Duke and his nephew strode quickly along the colonnade, followed by Fafila, who almost had to run to keep up. In the second courtyard, they crossed paths with the three Swabian commanders. The three handsome men with the bobbed hair were beside themselves with anger.

"By the Blessed Virgin! What is going on here?", complained Ricimir.

"If this is your leader, we had better take ship for Aquitaine!", growled Filimir, not even bothering to greet the Duke of Amaya.

"That man is insane! You are wasting your time!", added Gildimir, as he passed by.

Petro and Toribio said nothing. On the office threshold, Fafila drew aside the curtain to admit them, but he lacked the courage to face his father again and excused himself.

There on an oaken throne sat the nobleman from Toledo, in the centre of a room with yellowing walls. There was no other furniture, apart from a listing table covered in rolled-up messages, pitchers of wine, glasses and trays of sweetmeats. In front of him was an enormous candlestick with dozens of half-burned candles, projecting his shadow onto the wall behind. It was that of a preoccupied hunchback, chin supported on his right fist. His face was white as a sheet. He looked twenty years older, and a good deal thinner than the last time they had seen him. He did not even acknowledge their presence, but just sat there, mute and immobile, focusing on infinity.

Toribio and his uncle approached. Now their own shadows were projected on the wall: one of a short man with a beer belly, the other of a lean youngster, his hair held in headband.

"What has come over you, noble Pelayo? The Saracens are at the gates and we find you unprepared", began Petro, his voice echoing round the empty room.

But Pelayo made no reply.

"What is happening? We have come with a thousand of the best men Cantabria can muster, as you requested . . . and instead we find your men standing idle, while the Asturians are facing the enemy all alone on the western front!", continued Petro. Still Pelayo did not react.

"And we have good news that would encourage even the most timorous of men facing the most dreadful of deaths!", broke in Toribio, hoping to arouse a bit of spunk in this dull-eyed old man with the dishevelled hair.

At this Pelayo lifted his head and looked at the two warriors. His voice seemed to emerge from the dim distant past:

"Surrounded . . . we are surrounded . . . like on the Rio Gades . . . There is no hope . . . Evil is everywhere . . .", he mumbled.

"What evil? What are you talking about, Pelayo?", insisted Petro.

But the Visigoth seemed not to hear, his mind still wandering:

"Lost . . . we are lost . . . as we were down there . . . surrounded by brothers . . . cousins . . . relatives and friends . . . Then he will come . . . He will run us all through . . . like lambs to the slaughter."

"Who is 'He'? Who will come? What are you talking about?", asked Petro, his patience wearing thin.

"Him . . . the Evil One . . . the demon . . . There is no weapon that will prevail against him . . . no sword can overcome him . . . no spear prevent him . . . no arrow stop him . . .", muttered the noblemen, offering the semblance of a reply.

Suddenly Toribio noticed something strange about the shadows on the wall. They were no longer their own. He looked carefully: the shapes were those of a fat man with a serpent's head, a stooping figure with the muzzle of a boar, and a tall thin character with a flattened face.

"Fafila . . . my father . . . they killed him first of all . . . then Verosinda . . . poor sister . . . and Agasinda . . . sweetest of daughters . . . those demons kidnapped her . . . she must be in their hands . . .", continued Pelayo.

Toribio's heart ached at this reference to the woman he loved, but the shadows were still there on the wall.

"They will kill us all . . . all of us . . . the last representatives of the Visigoth race . . . the offspring of Baltha's line . . . not one will survive . . . the end of a people . . . just like the Romans . . . no church or place of refuge . . . Or worse! . . . doomed again to wander the earth . . . as in the beginning . . . before the time of Alaric the Great!", continued the old Duke, standing up and pathetically flapping his hands. But his movements found no echo on the wall. There were only the ugly, deformed shapes of the three demons Toribio had recognised.

Instinctively, the young man from Valle went down on his knees and began praying out loud:

"Rejoice, Eternally Virgin Bride!"

At this, the shadows showed signs of restless agitation.

"Rejoice, radiance that enlightens men's souls . . ."

The shadows vanished from the wall, the curtains in the room were blown about by a gusting wind and the parchments on the table slid to the ground.

"Rejoice, defence against invisible enemies . . . ,

Rejoice, through you the curse is broken", prayed Toribio.

At this instant, the three demons—Oppa, Jabalius and Sisbertus—materialised in flesh and blood, wearing long black breastplates and armed with heavy swords.

"Welcome back, Toribio Del Valle!", snarled Oppa, showing his teeth in a sarcastic smile.

Toribio rose and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"So it was you, demons from darkest hell, hiding in the shadows to addle the mind of our commander", he said.

"Who else? For years I have been awaiting this moment. Surely you don't think the death of this man's father was enough of itself to prevent the Third Event, do you?", asked Oppa, raising his voice.

Pelayo and Petro were both dumbstruck by this apparition.

"Who are you? What father are you referring to?", stammered Pelayo.

"Yours, my dear fellow . . . the Fafila who was Duke at the court of King Ergica until he fell victim to my fangs!", replied the demon, again taking on the appearance of a serpent.

"My father Fafila? . . . My father was murdered by Wittiza, Duke of Tuy! What are you trying to tell me, evil creature?", asked Pelayo, as if waking from a long dream.

But Toribio remembered what King Roderic had said and understood in a flash.

"Then it was not Wittiza, but you, the counterfeit brother, who killed this man's father!", exclaimed the young man, with a look of horror.

"Indeed it was!", replied the demon, showing his fangs in a wicked sneer.

Pelayo was overwhelmed. The truth so brutally revealed was very different from the story he had been told for the last twenty years. The blood began to return to his pallid face and rage welled up inside him. He tried to get closer to Oppa, but the demon stared at him intently and Pelayo's muscles refused to obey the order from his brain.

Toribio knelt down again and continued his recitation of the Akathistos.

"Rejoice, because you plundered the kingdom of the dead;

Rejoice, because through you comes the blazing light", he pressed on, hoping the prayer would be effective, even in the absence of the cross.

But the three demons unsheathed their swords and made as if to overpower him.

"Rejoice, Eternally Virgin Bride", he began again.

At this point, Pelayo's twelve spatharii entered, swords drawn. Anila, Aprila, Dunila, Brandila, Rikkila, Wadila, Sunnila, Murila, Neufila, Beccila and Egila surrounded the three demons and a tremendous struggle began. The room was filled with the sound of clashing blades and mighty strokes falling on the swordsmen's body armour. Then, after a furious exchange of blows, the demons mysteriously stopped. The twelve spatharii, too, held off, their penetrating eyes clearly visible behind their visors. Together the demons screamed:

"Curse you! You will not win this battle! The cross is lost! Our Dark Lord had dominion for ever!"

At this, one of the twelve lowered his visor, revealing an aged face framed by a thick white beard.

"The cross is not lost", he said. "It is already returning and you will have to suffer for ever in the outer darkness prepared for your Lord of Evil!"

Hearing this, the demons snarled and gnashed their teeth hysterically, then withdrew into a corner and, uttering horrible blasphemies, disappeared in a puff of sulphur. The twelve spatharii put up their swords and, swift and light as if borne on wings, left the room as they had come.

Petro and Toribio were appalled, Pelayo petrified.

"What miracle is this?", stammered the Visigoth general, seeming to awake from a long nightmare. "I saw three demons and, among them, one who claimed to have killed my father . . . then my spatharii engaging them in combat . . . and the demons uttering strange things. What is the cross they were talking about? . . . And who was the spatharius with the white beard? I've never seen that face before!", he said, his face meanwhile resuming its normal flesh colour and his cobalt blue eyes recovering their sparkle.

Toribio of course knew what cross the demons had been talking about, and the identity of the elderly soldier who had countered their curses was no secret to him.

"Maybe your eyes were deceiving you, Pelayo . . . Of course we all know your spatharii . . . You have been sick for a long time under the influence of those malevolent shades", he began to explain rather lamely.

"But I saw them too! They were real demons . . . and, as for that old fellow, I've never seen him before!", interrupted his uncle.

Toribio was now in a difficult position. He could not reveal the mystery of the Ruby Cross, but nor could he pretend that what they had seen was just a mirage.

"Maybe there is something you should know, Duke Pelayo", he said.

Petro looked at him in surprise. Pelayo, too, though still confused by the shocking revelation about the murder of his father, did not see how the boy could know anything more. But Toribio's intention was to tell only a part of the truth, certainly not to reveal that he was the bearer of the cross.

"We are not alone in this terrible struggle . . .", he began, and gave a detailed account of the miraculous appearances of the red lion.

Pelayo was greatly impressed, but Petro was already familiar with these events.

"That's true. I have been told as much by my brother-in-law and my lieutenants", he confirmed and, in turn, informed Pelayo of the visions they had seen in the caves of Val Misteriosa.

Pelayo was even more amazed and seemed incapable of making any comment on these extraordinary phenomena.

"But I still don't see the link between what has just happened and this matter of the crosses, Toribio", concluded Petro, looking his nephew straight in the eye. Toribio took a moment to collect his thoughts, then replied:

"Maybe there is something else I should tell you."

They both looked at him intently, while Toribio slowly told them about his encounter in the cave on the Pico Dobra, albeit avoiding any mention of the cross.

This time, both Pelayo and Petro were taken aback.

"Your father has never told me anything about this!", said Petro. "So you are telling me you met a saint, and that he has protected you throughout your adventures?"

Toribio felt under pressure to open up and share the real secret.

"Do you also know the meaning of the crosses mentioned by our ancestors in the Hall of the Kings?", his uncle asked point blank, in a flash of intuition. "I asked you about it and you said you were unable to give an answer."

Now Toribio was in deep trouble. He could not tell the truth, nor could he lie to throw them off the scent. He was on the point of giving in, when

suddenly the heralds at the entrance of the villa sounded their trumpets. The interruption gave Toribio the respite he needed.

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For a few long seconds, the three men looked at one another but said nothing. Then they heard footsteps and approaching shouts and cries of anger.

"Coward! Where are you? Coward, I say!". The voice was that of Xilo of the Luggoni. The old Asturian chieftain burst into the room, gasping for breath. His features were contorted, his grey beard and hair matted with blood and dust, his helmet missing. His body armour, also stained with blood, was torn at various points, and his chain mail had come apart at neck and wrists. Xilo brandished his sword at Pelayo.

"Coward! You betrayed us! Where were the reinforcements that were supposed to arrive yesterday?", he yelled in a rage. "Didn't our messengers get through to you? We've been sending them for the last week. You were fully aware of what we were facing! Cowards!", he bellowed again.

The others looked on in amazement. Then Xilo collapsed on the floor.

"They have overrun us! They broke through last night at Villa Flaviana . . . I gathered our forces there, but it was no use. We have lost Abilio of the Abilici, and Cilio of the Arnumini, and I do not know what has become of Naelio of the Paesici or Milio of the Pembeli, whom I left at Villa Maior", he continued less stridently but still in great agitation.

"There are three times as many of them as us, maybe six or seven thousand . . . They have iron battering rams, catapults high as hills, mangonels like towers, ballistae as tough and solid as oak trees . . . and armour that cannot be penetrated by even the sharpest javelin. Their horses are fleet of foot, their camels tireless, their elephants capable of smashing a palisade as if it were an oatmeal pancake! And as for you, Pelayo, here you are, fresh and undisturbed in your fine palace, with whole contingents of well-trained soldiers camped outside doing nothing! Shame on you, leader of the Visigoths! This is a betrayal!", he concluded, spitting at the feet of the nobleman from Toledo.

Pelayo was mortified. There was a long silence, with only the sound of the wind blowing outside. Petro did not feel able to make any comment in the face of such anger.

"With the troops we have left, Villa Maior will not hold out for long. Even if God smiles on us, they will be here by tomorrow," went on Xilo,

recovering a shred of composure. "I have brought only a hundred of my men with me, and then—if I have heard correctly—there are the ones Fruela saved from Amaya."

Pelayo and Petro still said nothing, while the wind whistled through the building. It was Toribio's turn to speak:

"Pelayo, leader of the Asturian Visigoths, awake from your torpor! You have heard the cry of Xilo of the Luggoni. You have heard the words of the persecutor of your family. You have seen the demons crushed by your spatharii. And is not the hand of God evident in the marvels I have narrated? What more encouragement do you want?", insisted the boy in the green jerkin.

Pelayo turned his eyes on him, scrutinising his face, his blond hair, his silver headband, the waistcoat with the lion medallion, the plush jerkin, the red sash around his waist. Then he expressed his thoughts calmly and quietly:

"I do not know what it is about you, young man from Valle, but today you have stirred in me feelings and passions I believed for ever dead and buried. Once upon a time I, too, dressed like you, without armour . . . just a hempen jacket and a band to hold my hair . . . I was young, like you . . . I loved my father. He was wise and generous. He was careful not to abuse his power, and knew what a dangerous privilege it was to have such influence over people's lives. He was honest and loyal. That is why the Evil One killed him", he reflected, looking straight ahead.

"After his murder, my life and that of my family changed for ever. No more pomp and ceremony at court, no more banquets with friends and business associates. Just humiliations, and wanderings in the wilderness . . . Maybe that was when I changed. That was the start of my hatred, my thirst for revenge, my longing to recover that lost happiness. Maybe it was this that opened my heart to the devil's temptations. Maybe it was he who pushed me to use weapons that were not good for my soul. I don't know . . . now I am confused. I see how easy it is to be corrupted by Evil, to make compromises and lose the true sense of justice . . . which cannot be separated from love!", he said, his voice down to a whisper.

"There is something about you which makes me think noble and true thoughts every time you open your mouth! I don't know what it is in you, but the one who sent you must have enormous strength", he declared, as tears ran down his lined cheeks.

The wind had died down and there was complete silence outside.

"So be it, then", he said, as if possessed by a new spirit. "For the sake of my people, my father, my sister, the woman I love and all my children, it is time for me to rise again! I, Pelayo, son of Fafila, will lead you in this last battle!", declared the survivor of the Rio Gades.

The others were moved. Even Xilo, tired and beaten down by hours of ferocious fighting, lifted his head. He was still dazed by the sight of the fortifications going up in flames and his fellow warriors being crushed under the feet of elephants, crying out for their mothers or committing their souls to God. But now he understood that change was in the air. They could all see that Pelayo, son of Fafila, the last general heaven had given them, was restored to his true self. Another gust of wind tore at the curtains around them. Suddenly the trumpets sounded again.

They waited for a while in silence. Then an Asturian messenger rushed into the room.

"They have overrun the forts at the Corona passes! I bring you the necklace of Doidero, who held out as long as he could", said the young man, exhaustion written on his face, throwing at Pelayo's feet a necklace made of alexandrite and the banner of the mountain gods.

Pelayo recognised the symbols and lively emotion was written on his lined and scarred face.

"I am well aware of the valour of Doidero of the Vadinensi. A man of that ilk was bound to fall fighting alongside his men", he murmured sadly, contemplating the mementoes on the floor in front of him.

"What you say is true, sir", confirmed the messenger, armour torn and face bathed in sweat. "There were several thousand of them, maybe ten thousand, infantry and cavalry . . . Berbers, I think, from their armour. They came with elephants carrying towers packed with archers of surpassing skill! They attacked us at the fort of Petraficta this morning, immediately setting light to our palisade with flaming arrows. Then they advanced with their battering rams. It was impossible to hit them from the battlements, and there were only a hundred or so of us. Then we saw Doidero and his men charge down on them from the mountains, half naked in their brown war-paint. Doidero led them on horseback, lance in hand. But it was no use. The archers of the rearguard cut them down in no time! Then their artillery catapulted the bodies at us . . . ending up with their leader, whom they had first impaled on his lance!", continued the young man, the horror of the scene still written on his face.

Toribio listened to his report, his facial muscles tense with disgust. The other three did not react at all.

"And what about Tariq? Did you see him?", asked Petro, upset by these disturbing details, which reminded him of the fall of his own city.

"If you mean the man in black with a purple veil round his helmet, riding a white horse, then the answer is yes", replied the messenger.

Petro confirmed with a nod.

"That means there are many more of them than we left at Amaya, and they have got here a lot faster than I expected . . . What demon has enabled them to multiply and cover all the mountains of the Vindius range in less than a week . . . and on foot to boot", he wondered in frustration.

"Obviously, there must have been many of them already waiting for him in the vicinity . . . They could well have come from Palencia. My father and your lieutenants encountered Syrian scouts in the area and saw a huge advance guard on the Sierra Grande", reasoned Toribio.

Petro was shocked by his nephew's convincing deduction.

"And that means at least half of those dogs must be fresh and full of fight", he lamented, turning to Pelayo.

The Visigoth Duke did not reply. He seemed lost in thought. They all waited for him to say something. At last, he was satisfied he had grasped the full picture.

"If Tariq's Saracens are coming down from the Corona passes, to get here they will take the route along the right bank of the Rio Sella. And if their operations are so well coordinated, they must have planned to arrive here at Cangas together with the troops led by Musa and his son."

He stopped as if struck by a sudden intuition:

"It must be me they are hunting, the bastards! . . . Of course! If they can kill me, they hope to discourage all our people, throughout the whole of the Asturias and Cantabria. And so," he continued, "we must leave Cangas and get them to follow our tracks. We will wait for them up in the mountains, which we know far better than they do. We need a place that is thickly wooded to hamper their archers, with plenty of caves to frustrate their artillery, but with some flat areas where the Swabians and our own cavalry can manoeuvre."

Petro and Toribio had no idea where a place of this kind could be found, but Xilo's face lit up immediately:

"The Plain of Rock-Falls, of course! It's the highest point around here and exactly fits your description. If we hurry, we can get up there by tomorrow morning!"

Pelayo beamed his approval.

"All right, then we had better leave immediately", he said.

The others at last had something to be enthusiastic about: "Praise God!", they exclaimed, bringing their fists down on those of Pelayo.

The Duke explained what they needed to do: "We will tell our people and family members to take the road to Porto Vereasueca, and give the necessary instructions to the troops. To the Plain of the Rock-Falls! There is no time to lose!"

Confidence came surging back at the sight of the fresh energy radiating from the cobalt blue eyes of their general. The officers were drawn as if by a magnet. In just a few minutes, the troops were ready for this final departure. The spatharii were in celebratory mood. But now there was no old man with a white beard among them—only vigorous young soldiers ready to obey the orders of their *domnus*. The three Swabian counts also got their men into line and Xilo sent messengers to alert the families of the Asturians in Onis, including the family of Fruela, son of Froila. In less than an hour, all the inhabitants of the village were despatched in the direction of Cantabria's safest ports, while some three thousand men set off by torchlight for the snow-covered peaks of those dark and silent mountains.

CHAPTER XXX

MOONLIGHT CAVALCADE

At the little orange church, shortly before the fork in the road leading to the Plain of Rock-Falls, the soldiers encountered the wagons carrying the supplies sent by Count Sancho. Pelayo ordered everyone to take as much food and drink as they could manage, then urged the drivers to return to Cantabria with all due speed. And should the Saracens catch up with them, he advised them to throw the whole lot into the Deva.

"Better satisfy the appetites of the Xanas, than let those dogs have it!", was the way he put it.

He then ordered Xilo to lead the column, but to proceed at walking pace.

"Remember that the troops from Amaya and Fruela's men are on foot. They have to be able to keep up with us", he explained to his officers.

So, as the moon rose, three thousand warriors fell into line behind Xilo, son of Xinto, who led them along the right-hand fork in the road. The old Luggonian chieftain knew those woods and narrow valleys like the back of his hand. They were soon breathing the cool, crisp mountain air and smelling the fragrance of pine and larch, as they advanced, on foot or on horseback, through the wooded terrain, twigs and branches continually springing back in their faces.

Xilo and Fruela went ahead with a contingent of some two hundred men. Half were survivors from Bartuelo's little army, smartly dressed in brightly polished scale armour over thick leather jackets, light blue tunics and brown woollen breaches. The others had escaped when the defences were overrun at Villa Flaviana. They had not had much time to re-equip and their breastplates and coats of mail had visibly been hacked about by Arab scimitars. Most of them had brown cloaks, but some wore only animal skins thrown over their shoulders and knotted at the chest. They all carried shields bearing the Asturian bear symbol and were armed with long swords, maces, axes and at least two javelins apiece. Their ogival helmets were reinforced with bronze strips and topped with crests of birds'

feathers, though Fruela sported an eye-catching brush of black and white horse hair.

Behind them came the Visigoth cavalry, led by Pelayo and his spatharii. The Duke was clothed in sumptuous armour consisting of thick leaves of metal arranged in horizontal bands and tied with leather laces. Under it he wore a white linen robe that came down to his knees. Like his cloak, his breaches were of red wool, held in place by golden clasps and tucked into voluminous sheep's skin boots. His domed helmet was also made of scales tied in place with strips of leather, and it was topped by a horsehair crest in a gilded holder. The frontlet and nosepiece were of pure gold, as were those of his twelve spatharii and the other officers from Amaya. On his back he carried a short pike of the kind favoured by all Visigoth kings, and the decoration of his eagle-shaped belt buckle was of shining amber. His mounted troops were clothed in the normal way: coat of mail to the knees, under a white tunic. They also wore red cloaks, apart from Petro and Fafila, who were wrapped in wolf skin mantles.

All the Visigoths carried shields featuring a peacock's spread tail feathers. Many of the riders were armed with lances, long pikes and broadswords, but some also had bows, and their capacious quivers, crammed with arrows, bounced up and down as they negotiated the uneven terrain. Gunderic rode beside Liuva and Teudiselo, patiently following in the tracks of the three hundred infantrymen they had brought from Amaya.

Behind them rode the two hundred Swabians led by Ricimir, Filimir and Gildimir. Under their flying mauve cloaks, they wore fine chain mail. Their crimson surcoats, pulled in at the waist by gilded sword belts, reached almost to their ankles. Their belt buckles were rose-shaped, as were those fastening their cloaks over their chests. Like their Visigoth companions, they wore domed iron helmets, but theirs were covered in curved metal leaves and plates decorated with Celtic crosses and flowers. They also had mask-like visors, deforming the features of the human face to terrifying effect. Their woollen breaches were similar to those worn by the Asturians, but their legs were protected by whalebone shin-guards.

In the wake of the Swabians came Froliuba, wearing her white tunic and lynx skin and carrying her long deer's tendon bow. With her were twenty or so young lads on ponies, many of them riding pillion. They were only lightly armed with wooden-handled goads and slings carried in their saddle-bags. Froliuba had insisted on following her fiancé; it had proved

impossible to persuade her to accompany her mother to Cantabria. After all, she was the daughter of Teodomir, the hero of the battle of Rio Gades, and Pelayo had agreed to take her along in honour of his old friend.

Finally, there were the thousand Cantabrian horsemen led by Hernando and Toribio Del Valle. Silent and wary, they made their way through those unknown woods, taking good care not to step out of line. There were the young Autrigonian warriors from Valle and the surrounding villages, Virone's Conisci (in yellow war paint), Talanio's Blendii (painted blue), Tridio's Salaeni (amaranthine), Alia's Avaragini (green), Turenno's Plentusi (purple), Atia's Tamarici (black), Aluane's Congani (red) and Origeno's Orgenomesci (ochre).

Following a muddy path strewn with dead leaves, the procession penetrated farther and farther into the dense vegetation, eventually entering a long, damp gorge. The higher they went, the colder it became. Many of the men fastened their cloaks more tightly and wrapped the lower portions round their stomachs. No one spoke. They marched on, absorbed and tense, hearing only the dull thud of hooves on the carpet of leaves and the snap of branches broken off as they passed by. The waxing moon shed little light on the winding path and only occasionally, when the leafy canopy opened up somewhat, did they see the enormous walls of rock and snow-covered crags that hung over them. When they emerged from the gorge, their torches revealed extensive areas of scree, punctuated here and there by shrubs and patches of bracken.

Eventually, as if by magic, they found themselves in a broad silvery basin, nestling snugly between pale mountains. Xilo gestured to them to slow down and put out the torches. They had nearly arrived and the moonlight was now sufficient to guide them. The order was passed back down the line and, soon, what had seemed like a carpet of fireflies became a dark linear mass, lit only sporadically where the moonlight reflected off shining armour. The horses followed the valley bottom, carrying their riders to the other side of the broad plain, where a majestic granite terrace dominated the whole valley. Here Xilo stopped and informed the commanding group that they had arrived.

He approached Pelayo and explained that there were many caves among the cliffs, where they could find shelter and light fires to warm their bones.

"And I hope to have time for a mouthful of bread and a few hours' sleep", he said wearily as he dismounted from his horse.

"You have certainly deserved it, Xilo", replied Pelayo. "Your idea seems even more ingenious now we are here. We can hide some men in the forest we have just come through and others in the surrounding woods. And maybe there is enough timber to erect defence works and some rostra" he said, thinking aloud.

"And in the middle, the part we have just come through, there are many large rocks that could conceal as many as a dozen men . . . and some deep pits to trap the Saracen horses", added Xilo, who had removed his saddle-bags and was taking a slug of wine from a small pitcher.

"Excellent! And we got here in just a few hours, as you said we would", replied the Visigoth leader.

"Which gives us a good idea how long it will take the Saracens", commented the Asturian. "We shall have to post sentries. However, I am sure that if they reach Cangas by tomorrow evening, they won't be up here until dawn on the day after. They are bound to sack the village, and will spend the night celebrating and getting some rest."

"I agree with you", said Pelayo. "After his assault on the western defences and so many hours' march, Musa will certainly not want to risk defeat because his men are not rested. Neither will Tariq. I wonder which of the pair will cross the threshold of my villa first", he added wistfully.

Then, distracted by a shooting star, he looked up at the peaks outlined above the southern edge of the plain.

"What is over beyond them?", he asked, as if suddenly troubled by doubts.

"The Cyclamen Valley, through which run the headwaters of the Rio Dobra, which runs parallel with the Rio Sella", replied the Asturian.

"Is it easy to reach?", asked Pelayo.

"You see that very high mountain? Its name is Auseva. The way is up through that saddle-shaped pass below it."

"Let's hope we won't need to, but we had better agree on an escape route in case we are overwhelmed. Are there any safer ways we can take to find refuge in Cantabria?", asked Pelayo.

"No, the northern mountains are too steep and those behind me are full of deep lakes which make progress very difficult", explained Xilo.

"Lakes? Up here?", mused Pelayo, vaguely remembering something strange Petro had told him when reporting the prophecies of the Visigoth kings.

"Yes, and there is one that is said to be always shrouded in a magic mist . . . Lake Perilous, I think it is called", replied the Luggonian chieftain, who had heard his father Xinto speak of it. "People hold it in great awe. The superstitious believe it is inhabited by the god of the clouds!", observed Xilo, expressing due scepticism where pagan cults were concerned.

Pelayo shook off the gloomy thoughts in which he was absorbed and assumed a more cheerful expression.

"Well, let's forget about such strange beliefs for the time being and get some sleep. Tomorrow there will be a great deal of work to do. And let's look to the Virgin Mary to protect us", concluded the Christian general.

"To the glory of the Most Holy Virgin, then!", exclaimed Xilo, offering a second pitcher of wine to Pelayo.

The Duke was content to drink a friendly toast with Xilo. After the terrible misunderstandings of previous days, it was an opportunity for the two leaders to renew their alliance.

Meanwhile, the others had also dismounted. Pelayo approached Fafila and Petro and explained what he intended to do next day.

"Fafila, Xilo has told me about some caves hereabouts. Take your men to rest there, and tell the Swabian and Cantabrian leaders to do the same."

Then Froliuba and her young followers arrived. Pelayo observed his old friend's daughter:

"If we were all as full of the craving for revenge as this girl who was robbed of her father by those devils, we would have won this war many moons ago!", he commented

Froliuba looked at him with her green eyes. The moon lit up her freckled face and the long red tresses that escaped from under the circular brim of her helmet. It was difficult to see her expression in that light, but Pelayo thought he detected a touch of melancholy.

"We will avenge him, my child!", he said, realising that he was speaking as much to himself as to her: the enemy had also robbed him of his father, though the demon responsible did not have foreign clothes and features.

"If you don't do it, father, I shall avenge myself with the hundred arrows in my quiver, and a little help from these friends of mine with their

slings!", pronounced the youngster, causing her fiancé, who was standing by listening, to squirm with embarrassment.

"I do not doubt it, but tomorrow I would prefer you and your friends to climb the cliffs of the gorge we have just come through and let us know as soon as you see Cangas going up in flames!", replied Pelayo, assigning her an important task, but one that would keep her out of danger.

Froliuba seemed keen on the idea and ran to instruct her little band of soldiers.

"Thank you, father, I've tried every way I know to dissuade her, but she wants to be with me all the time now, especially since they kidnapped Agasinda", said Fafila.

Sadness came over Pelayo's face at the mention of that painful reality.

"To be honest, I don't know how it will all finish, but I would at least like you young people to make it to safety. And if you manage to do so, my son, promise me you will accept the fate of our people like a wise leader. Don't let your heart be shrivelled up by the desire for revenge", he said, looking his son in the eyes.

Fafila did not really understand the reason for this exhortation, but nodded his agreement.

"And now let's go to it! Send all the soldiers and horses to take shelter and organise the guard duties. I want everyone to be ready at first light", Pelayo ordered.

Fafila went off with the spatharii and their contingents, and soon they were all settled in the nearby caverns, followed by their companions from Amaya, the Swabians and the Cantabrian tribesmen. Everyone benefited from the warmth of the fires they lit, and ate some of the excellent provisions the Count of San Emeterio had got through to them in the nick of time.

The following morning, Pelayo held long discussions with his son, his officers, the Swabian knights, Duke Petro, and finally Hernando, Toribio and the Cantabrian chieftains. Then, after a substantial breakfast consisting of crusty wheaten bread, succulent olives, delicious honey and first-class wine from Aquitaine, each maniple and squadron of the little legion set about its appointed task in the valley and surrounding woods.

Froliuba and her look-outs took the pathway leading to the western heights. The Swabian knights, Fafila and Pelayo's spatharii began exploring the stands of larch on the mountain slopes on the northern edge

of the plain. Petro took Gunderic, Liuva and Teudiselo and went down to survey the mounds and rock-falls below them. The Cantabrians split up to reconnoitre the woods to the west and the south, while Xilo went with Fruela and his men to explore the thickets below the south-eastern side of the granite terrace where they had stopped the evening before. They hoped to find brambles enough to weave defensive barriers and hornbeam or ash saplings to provide strong poles with which to improvise some catapults.

Toribio wanted to spend time with Fruela. The two had met at breakfast, not having seen each other since the night Amaya fell. Toribio arranged to rejoin his father later.

"Tell me, Fruela, what is that splendid crest you are sporting?", asked Toribio, as they clambered over rocky ground covered in thick undergrowth.

"It was given me by my father Froila, when he learned what I had done at Amaya", replied the young Asturian "He told me he had it from his grandfather Merexildo, who wore it when he was in the service of General Suintila in the victorious war against the Byzantines a hundred years ago. He thought it would bring me luck!", the new leader of the Arcadeuni explained with conviction.

"We shall certainly need plenty of that, Fruela son of Froila . . . though I hope it will come in the form of an intervention from God!", remarked Toribio.

"What do you mean? Aren't we capable of dealing with these enemies on our own?", asked Fruela.

"I don't think so", replied Toribio." There are too many of them. Our part is to defend ourselves to the best of our ability, but without the help of the Lord and the Virgin Mary we shall not get very far."

"And why would they abandon us at so important a moment?", asked Fruela, as they forced their way through a dense thicket of juniper bushes.

"Maybe they will not abandon us, but help from heaven has to be deserved, you know, Fruela", replied Toribio.

"There's something I have been wanting to say for a long time, Toribio Del Valle . . . Maybe now is the right moment . . . because I don't know if I shall again enjoy the sight of the sun going down in all its splendour", burst out the youngster.

Toribio observed him, slightly embarrassed.

"I just want to thank you for your trust and the courage it has inspired in me. Now everyone takes my advice and obeys the orders I hand down to them. But you were the only one who showed faith in me at the beginning, before that long journey over the plains and mountains of Hispania", he said with great seriousness.

Toribio smiled. "No one in this world can find the courage to become a man unless he knows he is loved", affirmed the Autrigonian, who in a flash of insight remembered the encouragement given him by his mother.

"Thank you, captain Toribio. And may God always send us Christians such as yourself!", murmured Fruela, deeply moved.

"Maybe it is not only Christians who have this kind of love, but all those who believe in One much greater on whose strength they can draw!", declared Toribio. "And now we had better get busy!", he said, approaching a tall shrub and drawing his sword to cut it down.

Meanwhile, Xilo's men had begun felling trees and making hurdles by interweaving the more flexible branches. They stacked them by the side of the steep path, where others loaded them onto horses to transport them to the centre of the plain. By noon, with the sun at its zenith, the valley was well defended by palisades constructed from brambles, ash and hornbeam, the individual hurdles carefully placed among the rocky outcrops and treacherous hollows of the rugged ground.

While these fencing materials were being prepared, Toribio noticed tens of Visigoth soldiers gathering behind the largest boulders and in the deepest holes. They stood there, silent and nervous, chewing a little of the dried meat and bread from the supplies picked up at the little orange church the evening before. The long wait had begun. The men were already eyeing the entrance to the valley, waiting for Froliuba and her sentinels to signal the first enemy manoeuvres.

But the hour had not yet come. The Saracens had first to reach Cangas, pick up their trail and proceed to the fork in the road at the orange church. And what if they took the easier direction, the route that descended to the banks of the Deva, which would bring them into Cantabrian territory in less than a day? No. If they did that, they would be leaving a dangerous army at their backs. They had no other option. Pelayo had calculated correctly. To win this wearisome war and destroy the Christian resistance—which they were certainly minded to do—the Saracens had to engage them at the earliest opportunity. The destiny of Hispania was therefore written among

these gelid, incorruptible rocks, which could be compared to a giant's fingertips: masked by an enormous green covering, but ready to close on anyone who dared disturb the ancient order of the cosmos.

Such were Toribio's thoughts as he crossed the open ground to reach the Cantabrian troops, now well dug in on the southern margins. There he met his father, who was having supper with the tribal chieftains on the woodland edge. He and Virone, Talanio, Tridio, Atia, Turenno and Origeno were sitting round an enormous camp fire. The only ones missing were Alia and Aluane, who had taken up position with their men in the woods along the western flank. Eight hundred warriors were encamped down here, hidden among the pines and larches in anticipation of a terrible confrontation on the morrow.

"Good to have you back, son!", exclaimed Hernando, seeing Toribio approach on Asfredo. "How are the others getting on?", he asked, as the Cantabrian chieftains stopped eating, distracted by the arrival of the Judge's famous son.

"They all seem well prepared . . . Uncle's Visigoths are in position among the rock-falls and patches of bracken in the centre . . . I saw Pelayo's men on the edge of the northern woods . . . And the Asturians are waiting, equipped with improvised catapults in the caves about a mile from here", replied the young man in the green jerkin.

"Come and sit down and try some of this excellent bread dipped in honey?", urged Virone of the Conisci, body daubed with yellow paint and hair held back by a black band.

Toribio readily agreed to join them around the fire and bit into the morsel offered him by his father's valorous friend.

"They will have a tough time against the arrows of the Avaragini and the javelins of the Congani!", boasted Talanio of the Blendii, his chest decorated with crows' beaks.

"And if they get past us, they will still have to contend with Pelayo's cavalry and our own Duke Petro's forces!", broke in Turenno of the Plentusi, wrapped in his dark bearskin and sporting ox horns on his helmet.

"And I would like to see how they cope with our long swords", laughed black Atia of the Tamarici, the chieftain with the human shin bones on his helmet, as he chewed his piece of meat.

"Not to mention our axes and harpoons!", added Origeno, the chieftain with the horse-shaped amulet.

"Don't be over-confident!", put in Tridio of the Salaeni, who was wearing an amber necklace. "Heaven help us to get our lances and axes on target when the time comes! Unless Erudino is with us, they will catch us by the ears all like rabbits in a cage.

"Well said, good Tridio!", declared Hernando. "You pray to the old God and my boys and I will seek help from the new one! Together, may they give us the strength and courage we need for so perilous a task!"

Toribio looked at his father. What better way of forging an alliance between the old beliefs and the Church's creed?

"Amen!", whispered the boy with the blood of more than one nation in his veins.

"Amen!", echoed his father, who had heard his prayer.

The others made no comment. They had all heard that the One God could protect them and were certainly not going to offend him by voicing doubts. The important thing was to have the invisible powers on their side. For their part, they would rely on their native strength and the weapons they had been familiar with since boyhood.

Meanwhile, the sky, which they now observed with a sense of foreboding, had grown darker. It was time to put out the bonfires and settle into position, waiting for the look-outs to sound their horns. The event that would decide the future course of Spanish history was only a few short hours away.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DAWN SURAH

It was still dark when the girl with the red hair, who had remained alert throughout the night, saw a light spring up beyond the woods that cloaked the entrance to the gorge. She waited a little longer, silent, huddled in her lynx pelt.

Beside her was Felipo, a child of little more than ten, his sleeves pulled down to cover his numb fingers.

"How long will it be before they come, *domna* Froliuba?", he asked with timid formality.

"Shh! Keep quiet, Felipo! And don't call me *domna*, I'm not married yet!", Froliuba corrected him.

The boy was silent and looked westward again. But there was nothing to be heard, apart from the noises of the forest below the arid promontory on which the two of them were squatting.

"And what if they don't hear our signals?", the child asked again.

"Shut up!", said Froliuba to silence him.

The child was hurt, but said nothing more. Hours passed and the light seemed to spread. Then the sky, too, changed colour, taking on a paler indigo hue. But still they heard nothing except the rustle of branches in the wind and the occasional bird calling.

Felipo was falling asleep, when Froliuba gave him a shake.

"Listen! Can you hear them, too?", she asked.

Felipo strained his ears and became aware of a hollow sound rising from the valley: distant drumbeats.

The seconds passed and, as the light strengthened, they noticed an undulating movement in the tops of the tallest trees below them.

"They are coming! Quick, run to the top of the rock and make the bird call you are so good at!", Froliuba urged him.

Felipo scampered like a squirrel up the bluff dominating the gorge, filled his lungs, put his chin in his hands and made the call of the cuckoo.

Almost immediately, similar calls arose from the trees clinging to the nearby cliffs, then from the other side of the ravine.

The drumbeats were now louder, deep and metallic, and they could feel the ground shake. Then they heard the first war songs. The ragged margins of the dark wood were teeming with lights, which rose and fell in time with the rhythm and, as the army continued its slow but inexorable advance, their flickering was reflected, ghost-like, from the roofs of the caves in the walls of the neighbouring mountains.

Clearer and clearer came the sound of undergrowth being trodden down by thousands of human feet and the dry, tearing noise of bushes and trees yielding to the passage of much heavier creatures. Then they heard the creak and rumble of hundreds of wooden wheels, and the swish of gigantic engines parting the forest canopy. Meanwhile, the rolling of the drums alternated with the repeated and prolonged sounding of trumpets, which gleamed in the torch-light.

There was something both dreadful and fascinating in their battle hymns, lifting heavenwards the words and prayers of distant, unknown lands. It was as if, at this magical moment of human history, the gods of the mountains had invited the world's bravest warriors to come and fight in this cold and desolate arena. Joyfully and whole-heartedly giving tongue, they came: the champions of Arabia, Persia, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania and Numidia, like a great family of cousins at last united in a common cause, having previously been divided by age-old quarrels.

The others were the enemy now: those whose tracks they were following, the paladins of a god incomprehensible to them, a god never really understood or assimilated by their tribes, ambiguous because sub-divided into three, impossible because born of a woman. The god of Islam, on the other hand, was uncomplicated and crystal clear. He would never sully himself with the fleshly weakness of this world. Their god was truly god, infinitely greater than anything else in the whole universe, great in power, in glory, light and love; a god ready to forgive anyone who submitted to him in true humility, but at the same time ineffable, because no one could know what he really wanted or would do.

And was this not the prerogative of the one true god: a power beyond human understanding, for whom it was worth fighting to the bitter end against the dangerous snares of those who sought to pervert his truth—the truth which only the great Mohammed had been chosen to receive and broadcast? Never again would the world see his equal. They need only

follow in his footsteps, turning all the creatures of the earth to this pure and perfect faith.

This was their mission, faithfully performed by their fathers and grandfathers, who had fought and converted thousands of infidels in Africa and the East within just a few decades of the Prophet's death. Now it was their turn. The time of Hispania and of Europe had come. This was their chapter in the Great Book of History. They had written much of it in the last three years, since their landing on the rocks of Mt. Calpe. Now was the final page. They were not going to be stopped by a handful of Christian fugitives. They could even afford to relax a bit; the hard part had already been done.

Such were the thoughts of Musa son of Nusayr, Emir of Hispania and Governor of Africa, as he rode his stocky little chestnut horse up the winding path. The woods put him in mind of the mountains of the Maghreb, though he had never seen a forest as dense and impenetrable as this.

The great general was completely clothed in white, from his linen tunic to his woollen cloak, from his silk gloves to the towering turban covering his hoary head. His face was tanned dark brown by the sun of the deserts in which he had grown up, but his features were soft and rounded. His was a kindly face, with a broad forehead and nose almost lost between full cheeks. His long narrow beard swayed back and forth across his chest keeping time with the movements of his horse, and his deep-set grey eyes peered into the darkness at every unusual sound. His right hand, with its rough, powerful knuckles, rested securely on the pommel of his scimitar, which was strapped to his left side.

Beside him, silent and pensive, rode his son Abdul, the young prodigy who had helped him conquer Galicia and the rest of the old Swabian kingdom. Firmly seated on the richly tooled saddle of a dark-brown horse, he was clad in a green tunic with yellow edging which came down to his knees. Above it he wore a leather waistcoat, strengthened by a steel-plated cuirass. His white cloak was fastened with a fine bronze buckle in the shape of a dolphin, his head protected by a flaming golden helmet swathed in an orange turban. He was a rougher-featured young fellow, his forehead broad like that of his father, but his nose bigger and slightly hooked under deep-set eyes. He had prominent jaws and cheek-bones and a narrow projecting chin. Cruelty was written on his face, barely concealed by his dusky complexion or mitigated by his large fleshy lips.

Abd El Abziz, known simply as Abdul, was not much concerned about the outcome of this final battle. He knew that their flags and those of Damascus would soon fly along the entire Asturian and Cantabrian coastline. No, it was not this band of mountain fugitives that bothered him, but what would happen afterwards. He was aware of the letters that Caliph Walid had sent to his father, and of the envoy who would soon be arriving. In Damascus suspicion was rife. Walid was old and his brother Sulayman was preparing to succeed him. The latter had little liking for his father, who was often criticised on account of the excessive taxes levied to fund his exhausting Spanish campaign. There were dark clouds on the horizon for the valorous family from the Lakhm tribe. And what if his father were asked to step down? Who would they send in his place? And what would happen to him?

"Whatever happens, when I return to Damascus you will govern Al Andalus from Sevilla", the Emir suddenly declared, as if reading his thoughts. Abdul looked at him, his heart swelling with pride.

"May Allah always protect so noble and generous a father!", he said. Then, after a short pause: "But those letters . . . please take me into your confidence . . . can you tell me what they are thinking in Damascus?"

The old man looked at him benevolently: "This has always been your way, my son. You worry too much about the things of this world. They want me to return to give an account of our expenditure . . . Tariq and I", he answered slowly.

"Return to give an account? Instead of thanking you for all you have done? But that is unjust! Do they not know of our achievements, and all the lands we have conquered with such effort and bloodshed?", asked Abdul in irritation.

"Of course they know. And maybe therein lies the reason, my son . . . Too many honours stir the winds of envy! The Omayyads are a very cunning family: they don't like any one to put them in the shade . . . Anyway, I shall go . . . then it will be as Allah decides!"

Abdul did not reply, preferring to nurse his rancour in silence. But after another couple of miles of being pricked and scraped by overhanging branches, he could no longer master his impatience.

"But you do trust Tariq ibn Ziyad, don't you?"

"Certainly I trust him. We have fought together for three years. He is a man who keeps his word. I myself chose him as Governor of Tangiers, don't you remember?" his father replied.

"Well, I hope he will prove grateful to you, then! You have always treated him as a son, but he is of another race. The Maghrebians are different from us Syrians. They are proud and find it hard to say thank you", commented Abdul.

"May Allah set your heart at rest, my son. Try not to prejudge events. As I have told you, you worry too much. Listen to me: pray. The Dawn Surah will shed light in our souls", advised his father.

And since they could not dismount and prostrate themselves in the direction of Mecca, he bowed his head southwards, closed his eyes and recited the familiar words: "*In the name of God, clement and merciful.*"

He exhorted his son to join in: "Say: *I take refuge with the Lord of the Dawn from the evils of this created world, from the evil of night when the darkness thickens, from the evil of those who set snares for us, and the evil of the envious man in his envy.*"

Abdul was slowly repeating the words of the prayer, when he was distracted by the cries of the soldiers ahead of them.

"Watch out! Watch out! It's an ambush! They are firing on the Libyan infantry!", bellowed an Arab officer as he came galloping down the pathway, his cloak streaming out and catching on the tips of the lower branches. The column came to an immediate halt. Without waiting for orders from his father, Abdul shouted to the officers ahead to have their men raise their shields and send up torch-bearers to illuminate the area from which the attack was coming. He also ordered the engineers behind them to tension the ropes of their ballistae and ignite the projectiles loaded on them, while waiting to discover the source of the enemy arrows.

He then dismounted, made his way to the elephants and got someone to help him climb into the tower of the one nearest. From this position, he strained his eyes in the torch light, but the sky was still too dark above the trees. Meanwhile, dozens of Libyan and Egyptian foot soldiers were being hit in the legs and neck by the slender little arrows of the Avaraginian archers, who were firing from the treetops and from behind thick bushes, perfectly camouflaged by the surrounding vegetation.

When fifty or so soldiers had been hit, Abdul gave orders to put blocks under the front wheels of the ballistae, or at least raise them by sheer

muscle power, and fire them in the direction from which the attack was coming. Though hampered by the surrounding trees and clumsily held in position by dozens of men, the engines began to do their work and soon long spurts of fire lit up the woodland where the green-painted attackers were hidden. Some were wounded by flaming splinters from the bushes on which the projectiles landed, but only a few were killed.

At this point, Alia pulled his black hood down over his head and ordered his men to withdraw to a higher position. From behind a rocky outcrop, he blew a long blast on a short wooden flute. This was the signal for Aluane's red-painted Congani to go into battle. Screaming horribly, the rough, leather-clad warriors charged the Cyrenaican column in front of them, falling on the compact mass of well-protected Saracens and hurling their formidable spears at their groins and chests. But only a few of the Africans were hit, because the majority had already knelt to shelter behind their large wickerwork shields. Aluane therefore led his men in hand-to-hand combat and, as spears, clubs, axes and scimitars did their deadly work, bodies began to fall among the leaves and clumps of grass of the trackway, bleeding profusely.

The Congani had lost only a few men, the Saracens at least a couple of dozen, when they heard the trumpeting of elephants, which charged wild-eyed into the mêlée, clearing a passage with their enormous tusks. The great beasts crushed everything in their path, Saracen or Christian, and very soon only a few groups of combatants remained, fighting among the trees. Aluane ordered them to retreat before reinforcements could be brought up, but too late. Just as the few surviving warriors were preparing to disengage from the furious Saracen hoard, the bold chieftain with the long pony-tail was hit in the neck by an arrow and died instantly, collapsing onto a soft bed of moss.

His body was recovered almost immediately by the Saracen soldiers and stripped of its golden bracelets and anklets, which were taken to Musa and his son.

"This is not Christian jewellery", observed the white-clothed Emir.

"You're right, father. It looks like the stuff worn by local savages", commented his son. "Maybe Allah would have us be more vigilant", he added.

Musa looked at him seriously, then gave a sweet smile.

"Allah is great, my son. So great that all we can do is go ahead and find out what awaits us up there", he concluded, before giving the order to form up and continue the march.

The rolling of drums and blowing of trumpets began again. Again the thousands of infantry advanced, dressed in green with black capes, protected by strong cataphracts, steel breastplates, bronze greaves and arm guards, wearing iron helmets with crescent-shaped crests. Behind them came hundreds of horses in vermilion harness, expertly ridden by powerful cavalrymen armed like the infantry, but wearing gilded helmets swathed in long black scarves and topped by sumptuous red crests. These horsemen were followed by hundreds of mounted archers carrying powerful double-S-shaped bows and quivers crammed with arrows. They wore chain mail armour which disappeared at chest level under thick leather waistcoats studded with silver and emerged again like a skirt below the belt. Their crests were green.

Then there were hundreds of camels, clothed in warm woollen coats and hoods of various colours. They carried muscular lancers wearing leather cuirasses to which were attached long strips of metal plating and shield-sized bronze chest and stomach protectors. Their crests were blue. Behind them came dozens of ponderously swaying elephants, fitted with towers packed with lightly armed archers wearing pointed helmets with purple crests, and slingers with yellow crests. And finally the artillery column, consisting of mangonels, ballistae and catapults, twenty men to each. The engineers were clothed in ordinary leather jackets, puff-legged trousers and sheepskin boots. For armour, they wore only coats of mail and pudding-basin helmets with black crests.

Meanwhile, the sky had turned pink and the stars were fading. The Saracens had begun singing their hymns again. To Musa, son of Nusayr, it was as if the verses of the Dawn Surah had gone out from their lips to the impassable mountains surrounding them. And he felt certain that their prayers had winged their way to Mecca.

CHAPTER XXXII

COVADONGA!

And so dawned the day of the Third Event—one of those days when the whole world stands still, and the gods fold their hands and watch, waiting, with fixed and waxen faces, to see the turn History will take.

One of those days when the fearful become fearless, the young and hesitant discover a courage they have never known, the old and cynical quiver like aspen leaves in an early spring breeze.

One of those days when mothers weep, wives look to heaven, children are silent and hold their breath.

One of those days when the foolish speak like the wise, and the wise like the foolish.

One of those days when the bowels of the Earth rumble, the Oceans murmur, the Forests whisper, the Winds cease to blow, and even the Sun is darkened, and there is no time to speak, work, play, or even think.

One of those days when the wild beasts are dumb, birds fall to the ground, fish retreat into the depths, insects hide away, the flowers harden and the fruits on the trees turn to stone.

One of those days when the mountains stare each other in the face, the rivers embrace, the waves of the sea recede, the deserts bow down and the clouds sit motionless on the horizon.

One of those days when dreams come true and truth becomes magic, Good encounters Evil and they fight to determine the world's destiny, Life encounters Death and they glare at each other.

One of those days when man understands on which side God's teardrops fall.

Arriving first on the green plateau, Musa son of Nusayr took a long look at the broken, undulating terrain. A light covering of mist veiled the uneven shapes of the rocks and obscured the narrow gaps between them. He exchanged glances with Abdul, then focused his ash-grey eyes once again. Only then did he notice, among the rock-falls on the left-hand side

of the central depression, the outline of a palisade and bastions made of brushwood. That was clearly the place. Without wasting any more time, he spoke to his officers, who set to work with their signalling flags. In short order, the heavy cavalry manoeuvred into line, followed by the infantry, with the mounted archers on the left and the camel-mounted lancers on the right. Behind them were positioned the elephants with their towers, and still further back the various artillery pieces.

Then the heralds sounded their war horns: OOOONNNN! OOOONNNN! The sinister signal echoed through the valley, carrying its dreadful message up the mountain sides and into the neighbouring valleys. But there was no response, no movement from the stone ramparts and man-made fences forming a continuous line between the wooded slopes. The towering mountains above seemed to observe them mockingly in the first rays of the sun.

Abd El Abziz lowered his arm and the trumpets sounded. Slowly the horses carrying the soldiers with the red crests began to advance in ranks of two hundred, and behind them the green-clad foot soldiers with the crescent-shaped helmets came on, three hundred at a time. On the left, the archers with the green crests also moved forward, forming three groups of sixty, while the five hundred blue-crested lancers arranged their camels in a half circle on the right. The elephants obediently took their first steps in ranks of ten, and the engineers began lining up their artillery pieces behind them: two hundred ballistae in front, forty catapults in the middle and sixty mangonels split between the left and right wings, with ten men to serve each.

Musa, his son Abdul and the group of senior officers pulled up their horses on a small knoll at the entrance to the plateau, from which they could observe the deployment in all its majesty, but in front of them all was silent and still. Musa therefore signalled to the officers of the heavy cavalry to move quickly towards the centre, which now seemed to be free of mist and totally unfortified. Obedient to their orders, a thousand Arab horsemen spurred their horses and galloped into the barren, desolate rock-falls. Musa had made his first mistake.

The crossbowmen whom Liuva and Teudiselo had skilfully camouflaged with sacking, mud and grass had their weapons loaded and ready to fire. As soon as the powerful Saracen cavalry came within range, they were met by dense volleys of bolts, which decimated their advancing ranks. With cries of pain and invocations to Allah, the horsemen in gilded

helmets began to collapse among the sharp-edged rocks like stringless puppets, helmets rolling among the boulders, proud crests in disarray. But those behind them still came on and, despite further losses, many got beyond the first rock-falls and leapt over the crossbowmen who had been tormenting them.

Here the hand-to-hand fighting began. The Visigoths confronted the charging horses with their broadswords and pikes, trying to disable them and finish off the fallen riders before they could get back on their feet. In a welter of blood, the massive red and white soldiers with the peacock shields parried the blows of the Saracen scimitars and sank their blades into the legs and bellies of their enemies, drawing spurts of blood that soiled the surrounding rocks and grass. In response, the Saracen horsemen struck downwards with their curved blades, slicing off limbs and cutting into necks and faces as if they were made of butter. The bawling and cursing rose to a crescendo, while the crossbowmen continued to bring down the horses of the approaching ranks.

By now the infantry were advancing, too. At least three thousand men were charging with outstretched scimitars towards the blood-drenched rocks, when suddenly they heard the note of a horn from the larch woods on the northern slopes of the valley, which were still partly shrouded in mist. Musa and Abdul turned and saw a mauve and white mass gallop threateningly across the short stretch of open plain towards the left flank of their army.

The mounted archers positioned nearby did not even have time to take aim. The impact was shattering. The Swabians ran through dozens of the green-crested Saracens with their long swords, then suddenly stopped, wheeled about and rode back to the cover of the larches. The manoeuvre threw the left-hand flank of the Saracen formation into confusion, leaving the officers unsure of what they should do. The losses had been relatively light, maybe twenty or thirty men, but the effect was devastating. Many soldiers were disorientated, especially since the crossbowmen from Amaya had begun targeting them again. At this point, some of the infantry officers desperately ordered them to pursue the retreating Swabians. Musa clenched his fists and ground his teeth with rage. This was the worst possible response! He was more than familiar with the attack-and-withdraw tactics of light cavalry. After all, the Christians had learned it from them! But it was too late.

As hundreds of foot soldiers ran towards the woodland edge from which the Swabians had made their sortie, the mist cleared to reveal a sinister sight. Twelve hundred Visigoth horsemen were up there waiting for them in a wedge-shaped formation, one hundred in the front rank, two hundred in the second, three hundred in the third . . . . They were divided into squadrons of a hundred, each commanded by one of Pelayo's spatharii. Pelayo himself led from the front, sitting his horse rock solid in his imposing armour and helmet with the gilded frontlet.

For the glory of God!", he shouted, raising his flashing sword and hurling himself into the attack.

His scarred face with the cobalt-blue eyes seemed to rend the air like an eagle falling on its prey. The enormous mass of riders bore down on the hundreds of infantrymen, charging through them almost as far as the rock-falls, where the Saracen heavy cavalry was still tied down by the fire of the crossbowmen. The enemy foot soldiers were smashed by the impact like standing corn in a hail-storm, their bodies projected in all directions like skittles by a well-aimed ball. When the charge ran out of impetus, the Visigoths rained down axe and sword blows on the heads of the confused few who were still standing. Soon the broad meadow running down to the central depression was thickly carpeted with inert bodies from which the lifeblood oozed away.

Meanwhile the crossbows had resumed their deadly fire, as Liuva and Teudiselo, each standing on a huge boulder, barked orders that were barely audible above the deafening din. Dozens of Saracen horsemen were mercilessly felled by the incoming volleys of arrows. Others were set upon by the soldiers whom Gunderic had brought forward among the rocks in support of the men from Amaya.

Impotent and petrified, Musa and his son watched this slaughter form their hilltop position. At least three or four hundred men had lost their lives, and it was clear that many more were at risk unless they took immediate action to deal with this unexpected attack on their left flank.

"Bring on the elephants!", the Emir shouted to the officers nearest him.

One of them raised a purple flag and, almost immediately, forty of the gigantic beasts moved forward, gathering speed until they were running like horses, the towers bouncing up and down on their backs. The earth quaked and the air was rent by their awesome trumpeting. The animals charged into the flanking squadrons led by Aprila, Dadila, Rikkila and

Wadila, crushing many horses and riders and impaling others on their wicked tusks.

Only the squadrons on the right, led by Neufila, Sunnila, Murila and Egila, had time to turn about and make it back to the larch woods. Pelayo's other spatharii, reacting equally promptly, ordered their men to make for the upper reaches of the rock-falls, where their companions from Amaya were stationed. Among the rocks, the elephants would be seriously hampered in their movements. Thus, with a rapid and clever manoeuvre, the bulk of the Visigoth cavalry managed to transfer to the centre of the plateau, which was well defended by Petro's men. The elephants did indeed have difficulty in pursuing them, which all but neutralised the effect of the arrows and projectiles fired by the archers and slingers.

At the same time, the Saracen infantry, having recovered from the earlier clash, reformed and resumed their march in the wake of the heavy cavalry, who were virtually at a stand-still among the rock-falls. The result was a chaotic mêlée, with the mixed contingents raising great clouds of dust and uttering harrowing cries. Before long, it was not at all clear what was going on among the rock-falls. Liuva and Teudiselo had withdrawn the crossbowmen and now, with Gunderic and his men, were contending against the combined strength of the Saracen infantry and cavalry. The Saracen foot soldiers attacked the Visigoths on and behind the boulders, and vice versa. Leaping over the defensive walls and hurdles, the Saracen horsemen charged the Visigoth ranks, whirling their scimitars and killing and wounding all before them. At the same time, the powerful Visigoth soldiers emerged from behind the massive rocks and fell upon the infantrymen in the crescent-moon helmets.

Pelayo had managed to scale the rock-fall, together with Dunila, Brandila and Beccila, and had joined Petro in his more elevated position to see how the battle was proceeding. Below them disorder reigned. Banners of all colours came and went above the rocks; horsemen engaged in hand-to-hand combat; Saracen infantry and Visigoth archers fought it out with swords, axes and pikes. But under the dense cloud of dust they looked more like ghosts.

Musa was appalled by the turn the battle had taken. He was accustomed to more clear-cut situations. Up here, among these hostile mountains and harsh gullies, his experience was of no use to him. The cavalry were in

difficulty, as were the infantry, and by calling in the artillery he would only be risking the lives of his own men. All he could do was wait for the shapeless mass of animals, men, armour, shields and swords to sort itself out, find out which side was getting the upper hand, then give the next order.

While the Muslim general waited patiently for guidance from Allah, his attention was drawn by a white dot descending from the meadows to the north and tearing towards them like a minor comet. Abdul and the other officers also noticed and began speculating on what it could be. Soon the whole general staff was concentrating on this bright dart, which continued to approach at speed, flying between the pale ridges and dark patched of bracken like an avenging archangel over the murky depths of hell.

But the dart was not an angel, nor did it possess superhuman powers. It was just a child. The girl with the red tresses galloped on with a wild expression, brandishing a long bow to which she had nocked an arrow with a silver point. She seemed to fear nothing, this daughter of the heroic Teodomir, whose life and family happiness had been stolen away by these African devils.

On she came, bold and free. She had now been spotted by the light cavalry squadrons, and even some of the Numidian infantry were following her progress, rather than pressing into the chaos among the rock-falls. When Froliuba was about a mile from the hill on which the Emir stood, he ordered one of his officers to intercept her. A warrior in darkest black uniform and turban set off immediately, riding a powerful horse and waving a long scimitar in front of him. But the white dot gave no sign of stopping. On the contrary, she spurred on her horse and accelerated, as if minded to face death and get it over with as quickly as possible.

Neufila and Sunnila were also aware of this act of madness, having rejoined Fafila on the edge of the larch woods with the men they had saved from the charging elephants. Fafila looked to the right and caught his breath, quickly grasping the dreadful significance of the event. Instinctively, he dug his heels into his horse's sides. The animal reared up, turned and charged off in Froliuba's direction. All the Saracen infantry and cavalry not committed to the battle among the rock-falls were now watching, mesmerised by Froliuba's incredible act of daring. The same was true of the Visigoth contingents assembled at the edge of the larch wood.

Fafila's horse, charging downhill, soon gained ground and carried him into Froliuba's slipstream. She, meanwhile, was getting closer and closer to the mounted archers with the green crests arrayed on the wing of the enemy battle line. They could have brought her down easily at that distance, but their officers, amazed by her dramatic apparition, preferred not to interfere and ordered their men not to shoot.

Meanwhile, the Arab officer was within fifty yards of Froliuba and pointing his scimitar at her head. Little did he realise that an arrow, travelling like the wind, would find his left shoulder long before he reached his target. As if propelled by superhuman force, the dart tore into the shoulder joint with devastating effect, almost amputating his arm. The Arab yelled with pain and lost control of his horse.

Overcome with panic, the animal began to slow down. But too late. There was a short, sharp impact and both riders crashed to the ground. Rising again with difficulty, the black horseman recovered his scimitar and, swearing and shouting like a madman as the blood coursed down his arm, searched among the bracken for the little white body he had seen on the other horse. As he was about to fall on the girl with the freckles, who lay there stunned, Fafila leapt on him with the agility of a panther. The two set about each other violently, Fafila parrying the Arab's blows with his large shield, the other trying in vain to find a way through the young Visigoth's guard. Froliuba looked on with anxiety, doubled up on the grass.

Suddenly Fafila stumbled and fell. Froliuba cried out in fear, but her betrothed parried the incoming blow and managed to get back on his feet before the Arab could deliver the next. It was only then that Fafila, son of Pelayo, noticed the sapphire pendant hanging from the neck of Al Qama, son of Marwan. Immediately grasping the identity of the man God had put in his way, he was seized by an access of rage and shattered the Arab's shield with repeated blows of his sword.

Ignorant of the reason for this sudden fury, the other continued to defend himself with his scimitar but stumbled as he stepped backwards, enabling Fafila to jump in and deliver a slashing blow to his right wrist. His weapon dropped to the ground.

"I recognise that necklace! It was you that killed my aunt", roared the fawn-faced youngster.

Al Qama understood instantly and a look of terror came over his face. He was about to cry out for mercy, but Fafila's blade had already entered

his chest. His face contorted into a horrible expression, as if he knew hell awaited him. Then his eyes glazed over and his limbs went limp among the blood-stained clumps of grass and bracken.

So died the murderer of Verosinda: Fafila had exacted revenge on behalf of his father; Froliuba had honoured her father's memory. The arrowhead that tore into Al Qama's shoulder had been fashioned from the point of her father's helmet, which she had been keeping jealously for years. She and Fafila embraced ardently, still shocked and excited by the furious struggle that had taken place.

"Let's get out of here, my love", murmured the young man in the wolf's skin. And not a moment too soon! The Arab archers were already taking aim: a few moments more and they would have been transfixed by at least a hundred arrows.

But it was not to be. Musa had changed his mind. By some strange instinct, the elderly Muslim understood that this had been no ordinary contest. He was sorry to lose Al Qama, but he saw the hand of Allah in this fascinating act of heroism. Those two creatures had merited the grace of his God. Woe to anyone who harmed them.

So the lovers got back safely to the larch woods from which they had come, and hundreds of soldiers, much older and more cynical than themselves, applauded their return. Later Fafila and Froliuba joined Pelayo at Petro's place of vantage. When the exile from Toledo received the sapphire pendant from his son's hands, he was beside himself with joy.

"Wonderful!", he exclaimed, taking him by the shoulders. "Now your aunt is avenged!"

Meanwhile, the hellish struggle among the rock-falls continued. Gunderic had left his two lieutenants and taken a maniple of men to form a protective screen on the northern side to cover the arrival of Anila, Aprila, Dadila, Rikkila and Wadila's horsemen. Petro had already provided shelter for Pelayo and the three other spatharii behind a strong bastion of ask trunks and oak saplings. The Duke of Amaya would have congratulated them on their successful incursion, but there was no time. The messengers sent by the look-outs continued to inform him of what was happening among the lower outcrops and on the left-hand flank. The elephants had scattered in that area, and all that could be seen of them were their towers, floating like boats among improbable waves of rock. He knew that Gunderic was still

alive and had managed to halt the latest advance of the Saracen cavalry, massacring them with lances and arrows. But he also knew that the enemy infantry officers were moving their men across to the right-hand side of the rock-falls and would soon encircle the forces of the blond-bearded Visigoth general.

Petro was not sure whether or not to warn Xilo to get ready to descend from the granite terrace and assist the men about to be overrun below him. When he consulted Pelayo, the latter advised him to wait:

"The rock-falls are only the beginning. We can't afford to lose all our men now", said the Duke, raising his voice to make himself heard over the din.

Petro agreed it was best to keep the two hundred Asturians in reserve. To them could then be added the contingents of Visigoth cavalry and the Swabian horsemen still hidden and waiting in the larch woods.

"If we can't beat them down there", continued Pelayo, "we must secure an escape route for ourselves".

Petro had already been informed that it was possible to retreat via the pass leading to the Cyclamen Valley.

"I still believe we can win!", he replied.

"So do I", replied Pelayo and added: "Let's try and hold out with the forces we have down there for a bit longer, then you can sound the retreat and send in the Asturians."

The Duke of Amaya was reassured. Clearly, this man knew how to wage war and would not allow the enemy an opportunity to beat him prematurely. The hellish struggle had to go on.

Gunderic had made his way back to Liuva and Teudiselo and was again leading his men in assaults on scattered groups of Saracen cavalry. The brothers, meanwhile, were fighting side by side to neutralise a squad of Saracen infantry. The brawny warrior with the cropped ear was swinging his axe ferociously to left and right, smashing armour and heads to tremendous effect. He had just opened the neck of one Saracen when he was attacked by another, who leaped onto his shoulders. The two men rolled on the ground, then the Saracen managed to free himself and extract his scimitar. But as he prepared to deliver the fatal blow to the Visigoth's head, he was pierced under his backplate by Liuva's lance.

Teudiselo was about to express his thanks, when the two men were overshadowed by an enormous dark shape. An archer mounted on its

back took aim and loosed an arrow. Liuva did not even groan, but stopped breathing and turned his squint-eyed gaze on his brother. Teudiselo ran to help, but it was too late. Liuva collapsed lifeless on the slab of stone at his feet. Bellowing with rage, his brother charged in under the elephant's tusks and wounded it in the mouth. The great beast screamed with pain, then reared up on its hind legs and came down with full force on the body of the valiant lieutenant, staving in his chest. So died Liuva and Teudiselo, sons of Teudelo and Merosinda, who had brought such honour to the city of Amaya and the court of its Duke.

Gunderic, horrified by what he had seen, rushed to their assistance with ten of his men. The elephant was writhing in pain. The tower had fallen from its back and the Saracen archers were just getting to their feet. Despatching them with their broadswords and axes was child's play, but what was the point? The two legendary warriors, Amaya's best soldiers, were lying among the rocks, almost in each other's arms, their ice-cold blue eyes fixed on the sky, finally at peace.

Gunderic burst into tears, knelt beside them, held their hands, wept some more, then gave vent to his grief:

"God of Heaven, what a pair of brothers we have lost today! What more do you want? Did not these two pure and loyal souls love each other in a way rare among sons of the same father?"

But there was no answer, only the background sound of clashing weapons and groans from the rocks around them. Gunderic bowed again over the lacerated bodies, uttered a prayer and, lifting his eyes to heaven, cried in anguish: "These two are with you now. Spare the others!"

Just then, a horn sounded the retreat from farther up the valley. The general rejoined his men, who were as upset as him.

"Let's go. This is too much, even for the likes of me", he said.

He managed to gather fifty or so men and reach Duke Petro's point of vantage. Here, protected by the defence works they had erected the day before, they found all the Visigoths who had survived the charge of the elephants, and Pelayo and Petro planning the next stage of the Christian resistance.

The battle of the rock-falls was now turning in the Saracens' favour. No longer under attack from Gunderic's Visigoths, the officers of the heavy cavalry had managed to reorganise their men and were making their way up higher. And at that moment, the Arab artillery opened up at last. Musa had

seen that the situation was changing, with the Visigoths withdrawing their forces towards the granite terrace overlooking the plateau. The time had come to break down their last defences with his catapults and mangonels.

Boulders weighing up to a hundred pounds began to rain down on the seven hundred who had taken refuge among the defence works, sowing death and panic. The black-crested engineers laboured with all their might to prepare and load their artillery pieces and unleash the deadly counter-attack. Those serving the catapults strained at the handles that tensioned the ropes and bent the long delivery arms. Then they released the blocks and more boulders were on their way, rending the air with a terrifying hum.

Pelayo finally gave the order to abandon the rock-falls and join the Asturians on the terrace above, which was still out of range of the murderous Arab artillery. Meanwhile, a smile had returned to Musa's face. The scent of victory was in his nostrils. He looked at his son, who also seemed relieved. But they were counting their chickens too soon.

Just as the Saracen cavalry and what remained of their infantry joined in hot pursuit of the last groups of crossbowmen struggling to clamber up the rock-falls, the long high blast of a horn resounded from the woods on the southern edge of the plateau. As the sun reached its zenith, the Cantabrians made their move. The battle was anything but over.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CHARGE OF THE CANTABRIANS

The blue-crested Saracen lancers turned to see where the disturbing sound was coming from. Their dark, Mediterranean eyes opened wide at the sight of the bare-chested, multi-coloured hoard of savages galloping towards them, waving javelins, long-handled axes, iron-studded clubs, swords and lances even longer than their own. Only a stretch of arid, bramble-covered land separated them from this thundering cavalry of black, yellow, ochre, purple, blue and amaranthine-painted warriors.

Abdul turned to his father, to see if he had any idea of what was happening down on their right. But the old, experienced Emir was just as perplexed as he was. The move had come as a surprise. Musa just had time to issue a few brief instructions to his staff officers, who used a light-blue flag to send a signal to the hard-bitten lancers, sitting upright between the humps of their well-padded mounts.

Abandoning their semi-circular formation, they closed up to form five straight ranks of one hundred men, the camels reacting skittishly to kicks from the armoured legs of their riders. Then their commanding officer bellowed an order to advance with lances at the ready, and the whole squadron moved down towards the warlike savages who had emerged from the pine and fir woods skirting the more pleasant side of the plateau.

The two formations advanced, eating up the intervening ground at a steady rate. Hernando and Virone were leading the Cantabrian cavalry, followed by their own men and those who owed allegiance to Talanio, Turenno, Tridio, Atia and Origeno. Toribio galloped along on the right flank, slightly apart from the others.

Then they clashed. The hundred lads led by the Count of Valle broke through the front ranks of Saracen troopers, using their shields to push aside the enemy lances and hurling their own spears. Hernando deflected the long lance pointed at his own chest and managed to deliver a sword stroke to his opponent's left side, just below his bronze chest plate. The

man cried out in pain, but Hernando's horse carried him farther on into the mêlée. Turenno's Plentusi piled in next. Sheltering behind their large shields and whirling their hatchets with blood-curdling cries, they penetrated the lancers' ranks, shattering shields and smashing stupefied faces, like wild flashes of lightening during a mid-summer storm. The purple-painted warriors had reached the third rank of the enemy squadron, almost unharmed, when the front ranks were again battered by the arrival of Atia's black-painted warriors and Talanio's blue-painted contingent.

The din was terrific. The Saracens were unseated by the javelins of the Blendii and wounded by the swords of the Tamarici, while the Cantabrians in turn were skewered like dolls on the Saracen lances and thrown lifeless to the ground. The mêlée became even more chaotic when Origeno's ochre-painted warriors joined the fray, planting their harpoons in the bosses of the Saracens' shields, followed by Tridio's amaranthine horsemen, who blocked the enemy lances with their strong oaken shields. But Musa's men defended themselves with determination and, although the enemy incursion had caused significant losses, they held bravely to their close formation on the backs of their tall, gasping beasts.

Meanwhile, Toribio continued to gallop along the right flank, observing the progress of his father and Virone out of the corner of his eye. The pair had reached the last rank of the camel-mounted squadron and were striking out at anyone who crossed their path. Virone had already unseated a number of Saracens, and Hernando had wounded many more.

Meanwhile, Turenno of the Plentusi carved a way through the middle ranks with his mighty axe. He had downed at least ten men single-handed, when one of the lancers managed to unhorse him. His helmet with the ox horns rolled out of sight. The veteran chieftain from Mons Vindius regained his feet immediately, determined to confront his next opponent, when two lancers set on him from either side. He parried their thrusts with his shield, but a third rider came up and ran him through.

Thus died Turenno of the Plentusi, collapsing in his black bearskin. His men were not even aware of what had happened, engaged as they were in avoiding the lances of the third rank of the Saracen squadron, alongside Talanio's Blendii, who were now meeting with stiffer resistance. With remarkable skill and coordination, the Saracens had closed up to form a strong chain, frustrating every charge made by the Cantabrian horsemen.

The further attacks of Atia's Tamarici and Origeno's Orgenomesci served no useful purpose.

Virone and Hernando were now cut off by the very ranks they had penetrated with such fierce impetus a few moments earlier. The two leaders dismounted, followed by many of their men, and began to engage the enemy with their swords and javelins. The Conisci managed to unseat tens of enemy riders and, once they were down, made sure they tasted the edge of their axes. Scimitars, lances and helmets were flying in all directions. Eventually, Hernando's lads formed a tortoise around their leader with their shields and opened a way towards the edge of the confused mass of bodies.

Hernando emerged with at least fifty of his lads unharmed. He was soon followed by Virone and his warriors, and they were joined by Talanio's Blendii and the survivors of Turenno's contingent. The fighting then shifted to the fringes of the pine woods where the tribes had rested the previous evening. Toribio managed to rejoin his father.

"What shall we do?", shouted the boy in the green jerkin.

"Let them follow us!", replied his father, smiling from under his leather helmet with the crow's feathers, the malachite pendant bouncing in sinister fashion on his chest.

So the Valle contingent, followed by Virone and Talanio's squadrons, began running along the southern slope of the plateau. Many of the Saracen lancers set off in hot pursuit, but they were charged by the Tamarici and the Orgenomesci, who had understood the Count of Valle's intention and, reacting quickly, disengaged from the mêlée to attack the enemy riders from the side. The swords and lances of the black and ochre-painted warriors were now finding the camels' flanks like the teeth of a comb straightening out a dense and unruly mop of hair. The result was fatal for the blue-crested riders, and their officer ordered them to move away towards the centre of the plain.

This was the signal for Tridio's Salaeni, with their pheasant-feather headgear, to press them from behind, harrying the Saracen rearguard with well-direct blows from lances, spears and clubs. The lancers found themselves scattered at the southern end of the rock-falls, where squads of Saracen infantry and cavalry were still battling to reach the defensive palisade in front of them. At this point, Musa ordered the lancers to retreat and, hearing the trumpet, they were just in time to find protection from the crescent-moon helmeted soldiers deployed in the area. The Cantabrians let

them go and followed Hernando and Virone, who were now close to the bastions erected beneath the granite terrace.

Atia, Talanio, Origeno, Tridio and the survivors of Turenno's squadron were thus able to join forces with the Asturian troops, not far from the dark caverns where they had slept two nights earlier. Behind the bastions, Hernando and Toribio found Pelayo, Fafila, Froliuba, Petro, Gunderic, Xilo, Fruela and the Swabian counts, suffering from battle fatigue but nonetheless intent on regrouping their men and retreating to the Auseva Pass.

"You get out of here immediately", Xilo shouted to Pelayo and Petro. "Now it is my turn. You, Fruela, stay here and wait for me with Bartuelo's men! You see that *petra fixa* down there?", he instructed the young man in the Roman centurion's helmet. "If in a few minutes you see Saracens emerge from behind it, you will know that we have been beaten . . . In that case, fire the fundibula and fight to the bitter end to slow their advance!"

"Right you are, Xilo of the Luggoni!", said the boy, swelling with pride at his implicit promotion to squadron leader.

Then, Xilo saluted them all, mounted, grasped his javelin and sped down the slope with the hundred brown and blue-painted horsemen he had extracted from the defeat on the western front.

As he disappeared behind the monolith, Pelayo and the others set off along the path through the hostile thickets on the southern slope of the rocky outcrops concealing the caves. Their intention was to climb the track that rose steeply towards the pass on the other side. Petro and Gunderic were left with just over a hundred men. They had lost almost all the crossbowmen and their soldiers were tired and, in many cases, wounded and bleeding. Many were supporting one another, or receiving help from their mounted companions. The cavalry, too, had been almost halved in numbers by the elephants, and by the attentions of the enemy archers and slingers, but the twelve ṣpatharii were all still alive. Fafila and Froliuba led this disorderly assortment of horsemen, while Pelayo brought up the rear, assisted by the Duke of Amaya.

Hernando, Toribio and the five Cantabrian chieftains went with them down the precipitous pathway, overgrown with brambles and juniper bushes, followed by the warriors who had survived the murderous engagement with Musa's lancers. But when they came to the point where

Fruela had confided his gratitude to Toribio the day before, the young man in the green jerkin and silver headband had a change of heart.

"I'm staying with Fruela!", he called to his father.

"Are you mad? Their situation is almost hopeless", broke in his Uncle Petro, who was riding nearby.

"They are sacrificing themselves for us. It is not right we leave them to their fate", replied the boy with the kindly face.

"It is not inevitable that they be killed. Their task is simply to make it difficult for those devils to reach the caves and take the route to the pass. Then they will rejoin us and together we shall lie in wait for the Saracens there", explained his uncle.

But Toribio was not convinced. "There are barely two hundred of them . . . The Saracens will slaughter them", he insisted.

"But they will be safe from the artillery in the caves", objected Gunderic.

"Exactly! They will end up trapped inside!", cried Toribio, almost in tears.

The Visigoth dukes, Gunderic and Hernando were touched to the quick by the lad's sensitivity and loyalty.

"My son is right!", said the Count of Valle unexpectedly. "We are making a mistake leaving the Asturians to face death alone. And this is their own land! If we live through this, how will we ever tell our grandchildren what happened up here today. A betrayal? A cynical manoeuvre to save our own skins? We are supposed to be Christians. How can Christians leave their brothers to face certain death?", asked Hernando, troubled as he advanced on Ederedo.

The last Visigoth dukes exchanged glances, then Pelayo spoke:

"So be it, then! Your son is a man of integrity—something I realised at Cangas when he was instrumental in restoring my courage. And he is right . . . I could not live with the thought that I had sacrificed Xilo. But we Visigoths must reach the pass. There is no other way we can set an ambush to catch Musa's men. They won't be able to get the elephants up there. It's an advantage we can't afford to lose."

"You go on alone, then. The Cantabrians and I will stay and help the Asturians", said Hernando.

Petro and Pelayo consulted together, then Petro spoke again to Hernando, who conferred with the other Cantabrian chieftains. In the end, they decided that Hernando, Toribio, Virone and Atia would turn back

with their men to support the Asturians, while Tridio, Talanio and Origeno would follow the Visigoths to the pass. Some two hundred Cantabrians therefore galloped back towards the bastions protecting the granite terrace, where Fruela and his maniple were waiting for Xilo to return from his sortie.

Behind the rough-and-ready defence works were huddled men old and young, their faces sweaty and dirty, inured to tough challenges, but more than anything anxious to die an honourable death with the heroic lad who had so worthily replaced their Bartuelo. They stood together, in silvery helmets and shining scale armour, wrapped in their bear skins. Many were pulling on ropes to tension long poles from which hung sacks of stones.

Fruela was surprised to see Toribio.

"Sir, what are you doing here? Don't you trust your decurion Fruela, son of Froila?", asked the lad, his face covered with stubbly beard.

"Of course I trust you. But I want to make sure that we both live to tell the tale of what has happened today!", replied the young man in the green jerkin.

Fruela crossed swords with him and was only too happy to have the Cantabrians join them.

In the meantime, all they could see on the horizon were clouds of dust. Then, suddenly, a figure appeared from round the great megalith and they saw, to their great relief that it was Xilo. The Asturian chieftain was galloping between the rocks, sword in hand. He had used up his supply of javelins and his armour was spattered with blood. He had also lost his helmet, but he was safe and sound. Behind him came several dozen men in sky-blue tunics and brown cloaks. The sortie had been a success, but anxiety was written on their faces.

"Quick, get ready, they're coming!", yelled Xilo, leaping the defence works on his horse, just as the first Saracens began to appear from behind the monolith. There were not many of them, but they had managed to break through.

Fruela looked at Xilo, who nodded his agreement, and the young Arcadeunian commander raised his sword and ordered the fundibula to fire. The ropes were released and hundreds of projectiles rained down on

the vanguard of the Saracen cavalry, killing and wounding men and horses. The survivors halted and their officers ordered them to retreat.

"That's not good enough. We must pursue them", shouted Fruela, seeking Toribio's approval.

Toribio simply nodded. The young Asturian smiled at him, then, without hesitation, turned and ordered a frontal attack.

"For Bartuelo, the people of the Asturias and our Most Holy Virgin!", he shouted in a voice charged with emotion, jumping the defensive wall.

The Asturian soldiers went over the top behind him and began running towards the enemy, brandishing swords, axes, clubs and shields bearing the bear emblem. Hard on their heels came the Cantabrians, led by Toribio and Hernando, while Xilo rested with his men behind the barricades.

The horses of the Saracen vanguard were quickly surrounded. Some reared up in fright, throwing their riders among the rocks. There were only about fifty of them, because the infantry were regrouping lower down after Xilo's sortie, and the elephants were still immobilised among the steep marble slabs on the northern fringes of the rock-falls. Musa had no idea what was happening up there, as the area was not visible from his hilltop vantage point, and he was now concentrating on reorganising his army, scattered as it was among the rock-falls and the southern hollows of the plateau. The artillery, too, had stopped firing, for fear of taking out their own men.

The mixed Asturian and Cantabrian horde therefore made short work of the squadrons of Saracen cavalry that has pressed on to the foot of the granite terrace. Virone unseated several men single-handed, finishing them off with his great axe or fine ivory-handled sword. Hernando fought alongside him, jumping from rock to rock with the lads from Valle, San Petro, San Bartolomeo, San Michel and Santa Monica, and attacking the riders who had got trapped in the narrow passages between the boulders. Atia and his dreadful warriors had positioned themselves in the largest gap and, planting their lances in the ground, formed an impenetrable rostrum, on which the horsemen with the red crests impaled themselves and were cut to pieces, swearing and cursing.

Fruela and Toribio were now fighting shoulder to shoulder against the Saracens who had dismounted. Their opponents were in many cases older and more expert than themselves, but they were tired out after hours of fighting, while the two lads were still full of energy. Fruela managed to wound two of them in the legs and arms. Toribio planted his short sword

below the body armour of a third Saracen who was moving in to attack Fruela. Then another Saracen came at him. The young Autrigonian parried a large number of scimitar blows, but his own sword was evidently too short to reach the other's body. Just as he was about to risk a hazardous thrust under the Saracen's wicker shield, he saw his eyes bulge and his mouth foam, then he froze and collapsed in front of him.

"For the love of the Virgin, I told you you would do better to wear armour, didn't I?"

It was his father speaking, as he extracted his dagger from the Saracen's back. Hernando was matted with blood and dust. His beard and hair were completely white. Thirty or more lads even younger than Toribio were grouped smiling around him.

"And you are quite right, father! Call it stubbornness! But today it was fated that you would save me!"

Hernando looked at his group of lads. "You see? A good example of how not to dress when you go into battle!", he preached.

His boy soldiers, well protected by their *loricae lamellatae* and leather chest protectors, examined Toribio's clothing with serious expressions, but none dared laugh. For them, Toribio was just as much a legend as Hernando himself, if not more so.

"We'd better get back to the defences. We've certainly held up those rabid African dogs. Come on. Pelayo is waiting for us at the pass", continued the Count of Valle.

The others, too, were ready to withdraw. The bodies of the Saracens, and many of their horses, were strewn among the rocks and there was no sign of others approaching. Clearly, Musa was taking time to reinforce his infantry and giving his exhausted soldiers a respite.

"All withdraw!", cried Fruela, waving his sword towards his companions.

"All withdraw!", the order was passed on from rock to rock. Virone gathered his men, Atia left the gap he had been defending, and they all made their way back to Xilo, under the granite terrace. From here, they moved quickly, in single file, ducking under the projecting ledge of the terrace to the entrance to one of the caverns.

"This passageway leads to a mountain pasture up near the pass. If we take it, we shall get there quicker and avoid dangerous encounters out in the open", explained the Luggonian chieftain, who was treading carefully alongside his horse.

Having passed a number of damp mossy ravines and recesses, the large group found themselves zigzagging between stalagmites and stalactites dripping with water. The pathway was lit to some extent by openings in the rocky cliffs above them and they eventually came, men and beasts, to the far end of the defile, where the exit was all but closed by two gigantic dolmens.

As soon as they emerged, a dense mist came down on them.

"What now?", exclaimed the Count of Valle. "How shall we find the way to the pass?"

Xilo stopped to think. This was not something he had anticipated.

"The meadow is not very wide and the way to the pass continues on the other side. If we stay close together, we should be able to find it, despite the poor visibility. But we must be careful. If we get lost, we could end up in the crevasses on the eastern side, or, worse, on the way to Lake Perilous. The area is enchanted and we'd better give it a wide berth!", declared the bearded, grey-clad warrior.

The other chieftains held a short conference. In the end, they decided to form a column in ranks of three and let Xilo lead them, with the leaders calling out their names at intervals to ensure they were still all together. So they advanced through the dense cloud, barely able to see the back of the man in front of them.

Toribio, his father and Fruela, who were near the back of the column, called out their names every fifty paces. The young man from Valle could clearly hear the signals made by his father, and by Virone, who was farther ahead. He was on the left-hand side of the column, in the same rank as Fruela, and did not intend to lose sight of his companion's boots, not even for a moment.

But then the signals became weaker. Now he could no longer hear the voice of Virone, and even his father's seemed more distant.

"Are we still in column?", he asked Fruela on his right.

"I think so", replied the other. "But I can no longer make out the shapes of your father's young lads.

Toribio called out his name, but received no answering reply from his father. He drew closer to Fruela.

"Something is not right here . . . Let's stop".

Fruela ordered his men to stop and gather round him. There were just ten of them, and no one was coming up from behind.

"We're lost", lamented the young Autrigonian.

"Wait. Let's try to follow their tracks, then", suggested the voice coming from the shape of Fruela.

Toribio knelt down and noticed some deep footprints on the ground.

"Strange. These don't seem to have been made by the boots of our lads . . . they have heels, and maybe spurs . . . which our boys don't have", he said.

"In this mist, everything looks different . . . but they must be theirs . . . the Saracens are nowhere near here", came the voice of Fruela.

"Let's move forwards slowly, then", said Toribio, "and hold hands."

So they clustered together and began to advance, bowed over and wary, examining the tracks on the ground.

"But where is the grass? Isn't this supposed to be a pasture?", queried Toribio.

"You're right. We're on clay . . . we'd better be careful!", replied Fruela, hanging on to his arm.

"Stop all of you", shouted Toribio suddenly, in a panic. In front of him the ground was no longer visible. There was nothing but a mist-filled void.

"The crevasses, damnation. We're on the edge of the crevasses!"

"Let's turn back, then", broke in Fruela, turning to grasp the hands of his nearest companions, but to his great horror he discovered there was now no one behind him. "But how is this possible? We were all together just now!", he exclaimed in surprise.

"Quick. Let's hold hands and get out of here! We're under a spell!", said Toribio.

But at that very moment an enormous dark shape rose up in front of them, and other shadows closed in.

"Who are you?", shouted the boy, keeping close behind Fruela.

The shadow nearest to him replied, but in a language not their own. The voice, though, was familiar to him. The shadow drew nearer still. Now he could make out a man dressed in blue, with a large turban of the same colour. He was holding a fine scimitar. The two lads unsheathed their swords. The shadows came still closer and Toribio recognised the features of the Berber. He had a handsome, pear-shaped face, dark complexion, sparkling eyes and a well-groomed beard.

"Munuza, be damned. What are you doing up here?", exclaimed Toribio.

The other seemed equally surprised.

"So it's you, little Christian with the magic powers! I can see we were fated to meet in the end!", thundered the Berber with flashing eyes, immediately aiming a blow at Toribio's right arm.

The youngster parried it successfully with his shield and thrust at Munuza with his sword. The Berber backed away, then he attacked again, going for Toribio's head. Toribio again defended himself with his shield and managed to plant the point of his sword in Munuza's right thigh, penetrating his thick white breaches. The Berber gasped with pain and the nearby shadows closed in.

Toribio turned and tried to flee the way he had come, hearing the clash of swords and shields a little farther on. Fruela had disappeared. Maybe he had been surrounded and was defending himself. Nothing was visible, but there was the sound of repeated blows. Fruela could not be alone. He was trying to make his way in that direction, when suddenly the ground gave way under his feet. His hearts jumped into his mouth. The fall seemed endless. Death must come soon. He began to pray and call his mother's name.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CYCLAMEN VALLEY

"Where is my son? Where is he?", bawled Hernando, desperately searching for Toribio's familiar green-clad figure among the scale armour and light blue tunics of the Asturians who were joining what remained of the Visigoth cavalry and infantry.

Xilo was at a loss.

"I don't understand. The order was clear. We were all to stick together. And we've also lost Fruela and some of his men", replied the Luggonian chief, equally puzzled and anxious.

Realising that something was wrong, Pelayo ordered Fafila and Froliuba to halt the advance. Then he went back towards Hernando, accompanied by Petro and Gunderic.

"What's happening, Count Hernando?", asked the Visigoth Duke.

"An evil mist came down on us and my son has gone missing, together with Fruela and ten of Bartuelo's men!", burst out the Count of Valle, increasingly agitated.

"Maybe they have been delayed . . . we will wait for them at the pass. There's no other way to the Cyclamen Valley. They'll get through, I'm sure", broke in Gunderic, trying to calm him.

"They'll get through? When, in hell's name? Look back down there, general!", replied Hernando.

The commanders looked back down the slope below them. The enemy was clearly in sight. In dense, compact ranks, the troops with the crescent-moon helmets were already coming through the thickets below the cart track they had just travelled themselves.

"They will be here in less than an hour!", shouted Hernando. "My son is lost! I have lost the light of my life!", he moaned.

"We shall find him, good Judge. Even if we have to scour these valleys for ten moons!", interrupted Virone, moved by his friend's distress.

Hernando responded to the Coniscian's words with a gesture of gratitude. But his anguish was not allayed. "Without my son, this war is pointless", he replied.

Petro seemed to understand what he meant.

"Toribio will get through, brother-in-law. God will not abandon him at this point", said the Duke of Amaya.

Hernando looked his brother-in-law straight in the eye.

"But do you know what my son is supposed to be carrying?", he asked point blank.

Petro met his gaze, a look of intense seriousness in his bulbous green eyes.

"We have all realised by now that Toribio is on a sacred mission", he replied in a whisper.

There was no reply from Hernando, who was still being supported by Virone. Instead, Pelayo spoke:

"Toribio is as dear to me as my own son, Count Hernando! And my wife has already told me of the tender feelings between him and my daughter Agasinda—may the Lord preserve her from that swine Munuza! Therefore, if we defeat these devils, I swear I shall be more than happy to see them married. But now we must reach that pass together and lie in wait. Musa is clearly advancing with his infantry, and maybe also his cavalry, but I do not think he will try to bring his elephants and artillery up this way. This route is difficult enough even for a small band of men like us . . . so we can still hope to be victorious, if we are patient and wait for them among the cliffs of the pass.

Hernando seemed more at peace. From Pelayo's words, he gleaned the hope that Toribio might still return and, if they won, a joyous future awaited him. This was no time to give way to despair.

"Right you are, noble Duke. I will follow you and will again fight at your side with all the courage and ardour that run in my veins and in the veins of the Del Valle family . . . I sense that God is looking down on us . . . . Dead or alive, my son would want me to fight to the end. So be it, then!"

And so saying he let go of Virone's arm and moved to mount Ederedo. Virone was visibly relieved and encouraged, as were all the other commanders. Xilo ordered his men to march on, and Pelayo turned his horse and continued the climb to the pass.

But a few moments later, they saw Fafila riding back at top speed.

"Come quickly, father. Come and see!", cried the fawn-faced young man in great alarm.

Pelayo spurred his white steed and followed his son, who was already heading back to the lip of the pass, where his twelve spatharii and the Swabian counts were gathered. The pass was wide, stretching between two slopes bristling with boulders and slabs of black stone. The peaks above were still snow-capped, and a strong wind was blowing. Pelayo galloped along the right flank of the long column commanded by his red-cloaked lieutenants, who seemed to be surveying the horizon, rigid as alabaster statues. He shot past the squadron led by the Swabian counts, also intent on studying the valley through the terrifying masks that concealed their true features. Finally, he passed the group of young lads led by Froliuba and came to a halt beside her and his son Fafila, who was pointing out something below. His cobalt-blue eyes grew big with surprise and dismay at the unexpected scene before him.

There they all were, in the middle of that splendid valley carpeted in purple and green—the Cyclamen Valley, divided in two by the clear foaming waters of the Rio Dobra, which ran between white boulders and clumps of yellow juniper. There they all were, forming an immense dark-blue stain: thousands of men in breastplates and skirts of chain mail, wearing broad silver collars, laminated steel arm and shin-guards, jerkins with flashing half-moon medallions, and bronze fringes down to their knees, their tall, forward-pointing helmets loosely swathed in white fabric. The foot soldiers were equipped with long lances and gold-headed steel maces, which hung from their belts. The horsemen carried wicked scimitars and large shields bearing the image of a ferocious, red-pupilled eye over a pair of crossed swords.

Above them floated tall banners, blue, yellow and green, with mottoes indicating the origins of the different tribes. The horses, too, were finely arrayed and protected, with iron frontlets covering their muzzles, leaving only the eyes and mouth free. There they all were: the Berbers of Tariq son of Ziyad. And there was the man himself, dressed in black and wrapped in a large black cape, his chest protected by a thick leather breastplate studded with gems and precious stones. At the apex of his gilded helmet flew a gaudy purple scarf.

It was a terrifying scene for all the Christian knights who had reached the pass.

"Damnation! There are far more of them than I saw at Amaya . . . maybe twice or even three times the number!", burst out Duke Petro, who had pulled his horse up beside that of Pelayo. "And there is Tariq himself, the man who besieged me and destroyed my beautiful city!", he added, spitting on the ground in fury.

"Toribio was right once again", came the voice of Hernando from behind them. "These men must have joined them from somewhere near at hand, maybe from Palencia or Leon", he said, thinking of what his son had said two days before.

Meanwhile, Pelayo continued to observe the man clad in black and purple, who seemed to be waiting for him on the banks of the Dobra.

"So, this lot will taste of our javelins and axes, too!", broke in Virone in pure Coniscian dialect, barely understood by Hernando and a few of the other Cantabrian chieftains.

But Pelayo continued to survey the scene below, in particular the sober figure who stood out against a meadow of flowering cyclamens.

"What shall we do, father? We are being pressed from behind by Musa's Saracens, and we have a force three times as numerous in front of us", asked Fafila, who had already unsheathed his sword in anticipation of an attack.

Pelayo looked impassively at his son, then turned to address Petro, Virone and the other Cantabrian chieftains gathered nearby. Then he surveyed the petrified faces of Ricimir, Gildimir and Filimir. Finally, he looked at Hernando, who was now on his left, mounted on Ederedo.

"Tell Xilo to halt his men at the pass and wait for Musa's army among those rocks. Froliuba, my treasure! May your father's courage infuse every particle of your body! You and your lads, stay with the Asturians and begin to sling your stones as soon as the crests of their helmets come within range.

"You, Fafila, come with me and my spatharii, down through that stretch of pasture that leads directly to the centre of the valley. And I want you, Petro, to be on my right. You, my dear Swabian counts, will attack first, when I give the signal, swooping down to break their ranks on the extreme right. And you, Hernando, Virone, Atia, Origeno, Tridio and Talanio, will go into battle immediately after them on the left, where that ring-shaped boulder marks the slope running down steeply towards the river bank. Then I will charge with all the Visigoths, and Gunderic will follow with

the remainder of our infantry", he commanded, speaking slowly but loud and clear, as the wind whistled in their ears.

Then the veteran of the battle of Rio Gades again looked Froliuba in the eye, where he saw tears welling up.

"Never fear. Your father will be avenged", he told her.

Now everyone was silent, tension at its height. Gunderic had arrived, as had Xilo. They, too, were stunned by the sight before them. Petro broke the silence, passing on Pelayo's instructions to his general. Froliuba similarly instructed the leader of the Asturians, who showed no resentment at being so addressed by a child. Titles and age were now of no account. All of them were part of one great enterprise, that of Hispania, the Christian world and a people still determined to have the last word in the face of the invader.

Xilo and Froliuba quickly disappeared among the rocks. Pelayo and the others formed a compact line along the brow of the slope, each group taking up the position assigned to it by the blue-eyed general with the deeply scarred face. Then Pelayo raised his sword skywards and shouted: "Today you are looking down on us all, God of Heaven! Protect your children and with our blood resurrect Hispania, your devoted daughter!"

He then turned to the Swabians and lowered his arm. "Attack!", he cried for the last time.

And so the final fateful battle began. The Swabians galloped down a long gentle slope dotted with juniper bushes. Like an enormous mauve avalanche, they quickly covered the ground separating them from the river and fell like lightning on the right wing of the Berber battle line. The Berbers tried to get out of the way, but the Swabian vanguard was soon in among the front ranks, forcing the entire right wing back into the river bed.

The Swabian attack was followed immediately by that of the Cantabrians, led by their chieftains, who hurled themselves with whoops and a drumming of hooves at the left wing of the blue-clad army. The Berbers were not expecting them and their infantry immediately moved across the river, lances at the ready, trying to stop them before they could get across.

Tariq, meanwhile remained motionless on the far bank of the Dobra, waiting for Pelayo to make his move. He did not have long to wait. As soon

as the Cantabrians had begun their charge, it was the turn of Pelayo and the six hundred Visigoth horsemen under the command of his spatharii, who had drawn up what remained of their squadrons in columns. They followed in the wake of Pelayo, Fafila and Petro like the coloured tails of a great kite.

Only then did Tariq order his cavalry to advance through the shallow waters and meet them in the great meadow of cyclamens that stretched between the two armies. The clash of sword on scimitar soon rent the air, already filled with the sound of Swabian swords and Cantabrian clubs falling on the shields of their opponents. The Visigoth cavalry were quickly surrounded by a forest of banners and men in light blue, smashing curved blades on the bosses of their peacock's tail shields. All fought on horseback, with incomparable grit and determination, but the spatharii managed to limit their losses with skilful attack-and-withdraw tactics, which soon disorientated the Saracen officers and obliged them to disperse their men.

By the same time, the Swabians had massacred a third of the Saracen right, striking off heads and arms with the edge of the sword, and the three counts with the bobbed hair were still miraculously in the saddle. On the left, however, the Berber infantry had already stopped the Cantabrian advance, creating hedgehog-like palisades with their lances, at which the yellow, black, blue, ochre, amaranthine and purple-painted warriors repeatedly hurled themselves in vain. It was here that Atia of the Tamarici lost his life, releasing his serpent-shaped amulet into the waters of the Dobra, which now ran red with blood. Hernando immediately understood what was happening and managed to get his lads to withdraw, followed by Virone, Tridio and Talanio, to a patch of juniper on the extreme eastern side of the valley. Origeno and his men persisted for a time in trying to break through the ranks of foot soldiers blocking their way, but then also broke off and rejoined the rest of the Cantabrians.

The Berbers followed and confronted them in the midst of the juniper bushes, whirling their steel maces. The battle reached an extraordinary pitch of violence and the Cantabrians were soon reduced to half their number under the assaults of a force four times the size of their own. Virone, in his black headband and bejewelled protective gear, beat his sword fruitlessly on the solid armour of the Berber infantrymen. Tridio and his men used their spears to try and penetrate the greaves and armlets of their opponents. Talanio and his followers with the wolf-heads on their

helmets, eyes bloodshot, defended themselves with their small *caetrae*, but found their javelin thrusts blocked by the shields of the Saracens. Origeno tried to break up the on-coming Berbers with mighty axe blows, while his men engaged them with their clubs. But, clearly, they were being overwhelmed by superior numbers.

When the Cantabrians had been reduced to three hundred men, close packed in a thicket of brambles, Petro rode to the rescue with Rikkila and Dadila's cavalry squadrons. The battle became even more chaotic, with the Saracen infantry caught between the Cantabrians, who were now fighting on foot, and the still-mounted Visigoth horsemen.

Meanwhile, Gunderic, having abandoned his horse, also arrived in the centre of the battle, fighting with his infantry on the banks of the river. Fafila had broken out of his earlier encirclement and joined the Swabians on the right with the squadrons led by Beccila and Wadila. This created an empty space in the middle of the ford, and it was here that Pelayo eventually came face to face with the enemy he had been seeking for months: Tariq son of Ziyad!

The survivor of the battle of Rio Gades scrutinised the black-clad young man with the dark complexion and noble features. The wide blue eyes of the former gazed fearlessly on the dark, cat-like slits of the latter, immobile under the arches of the frontlet of his helmet, which reflected the red glow of the setting sun. The pair studied each other for what seemed an eternity, detached and totally untroubled by the infernal din around them. There they sat, upright on their white steeds in the middle of the ford, as if sunk in profound, silent meditation, while one of the most dramatic moments in human history was playing itself out. Facing south: the man who for years had held high the standard of the Christian faith; facing north: the man who had raised the banners of Islam. At last, the irresistible force and the immovable mass had come face to face.

Tariq forced an arid smile:

"Here you are, then, champion of Hispania and the Church of Rome!", he exclaimed, a sudden gust of wind blowing out his black cloak to reveal his powerful breastplate.

The man in the white surcoat and red cape did not reply, but continued to watch his adversary, not moving a muscle.

"In your eyes, Pelayo son of Fafila, I read the depth of hatred you have borne me since I defeated your forces on the banks of that great

river . . . Now we are far from that place, amid the waters of a much smaller stream . . . Do you think it sufficient to slake your thirst for vengeance?", asked Tariq, a smile still on his face.

Pelayo took in the other's words. The Berber had perfectly grasped what the Visigoth leader was feeling in his inmost self.

"I knew you to be a capable soldier. Now I see that you are also a man of intelligence, Tariq son of Ziyad!", he eventually replied.

It was Tariq's turn to be silent and, for a moment, he felt nervous in the face of the calm fury he read on the marble features of the other. Pelayo sensed his fear, but still made no move. Tariq appeared to tense up. Suddenly, his slit-like eyes opened wide, releasing an intense flash of light.

"Let Allah decide, then!", cried the Berber, digging his heels into the flanks of his horse and drawing a long golden scimitar.

"And may God and the Virgin do the rest!", murmured the Christian Duke, pointing his sword and spurring on his horse.

The two knights crossed swords in mid air without making contact, like high-ranking officers saluting each other. But then, before even reaching the other side of the river, they wheeled round and charged, weapons at the ready. Tariq was left-handed, which gave him an advantage: on the return, his weapon was closer to his opponent's body. He therefore directed his blade straight at the Visigoth's neck, while Pelayo's sword was only half way through its stroke. But to no avail: Pelayo swerved sufficiently to avoid the fatal blow, and the horses were again on opposite banks of the shallow stream.

They immediately engaged again. This time it was Pelayo who had the advantage, with his right arm half extended. But Tariq easily fielded the blow on his shield, skilfully pulled up his horse, turned and unleashed a violent slashing stroke to Pelayo's shoulder. The blade produced sparks as it glanced over the plates of his body armour, but did not bite into the underlying fabric. Pelayo recovered himself immediately and moved his sword across to parry the follow-up blow. Then he raised his guard and, with a deft turn of the wrist, brought his blade down on Tariq's right side, cutting through the laces that attached his magnificent breastplate to the backplate of his body armour.

Realising he was losing part of his vital protection, Tariq spurred his horse forward to prevent his opponent from sticking him in the belly. He reached the farther bank, dismounted and waited for the Christian knight,

scimitar raised. Pelayo charged straight at him, hoping to strike off his head with a downward stroke of his sword. But Tariq was agile and, dropping almost to his knees, dodged the blow and sank the point of his scimitar into the underbelly of the Visigoth's horse. The wretched animal folded up in agony and Pelayo made a hard landing, almost crushed by his heavy armour, his helmet parting company with his head.

Tariq waited for him to get up and the contest continued. Pelayo managed to block everything Tariq threw at him, and vice versa, until at last the Berber feinted towards the other's stomach. The Visigoth Duke moved to parry the blow, but Tariq switched direction, got in under Pelayo's blade and slashed his left forearm. Pelayo cried out in pain and lost his hold on the handle of his shield, which fell into the waters of the ford. Seizing the advantage, with a rapid horizontal movement Tariq smashed the thick edge of his scimitar against the sword that Pelayo still held extended in front of him. The blow was so hard that it struck sparks from both blades, and broke Pelayo's weapon in two.

Meanwhile, the battle was raging around them. Gunderic had managed to charge and break through a Berber defensive palisade and was reigning blows on his opponents' shields. Taller and wearing lighter armour, his infantry easily forced a way among the blue-clad soldiers protected by a mixture of bronze and steel. Fafila, too, had succeeded in pushing beyond the far bank of the Dobra and had joined up with the Swabian cavalry, now folding up the rear of the enemy right wing. With Wadila, Beccila and a hundred or so Visigoths, the young man with the fawn-like face and raven hair was causing havoc among the enemy infantry, when Beccila shouted to him to look round.

There, Fafila saw his father on his knees in the middle of the ford, without sword or shield. He immediately pulled up his horse and tried to reach him, but was attacked by a Saracen foot soldier, who managed to get a hold on his right leg. Fafila slashed at his assailant's neck and saw the man collapse on the grass. He then spurred on his horse, but still had to run the gauntlet of a number of enemy soldiers to reach his father—a manoeuvre he could not perform unaided.

But there was no need. Once again, Tariq refused to strike an unarmed man and gave Pelayo time to deploy his pike. Combat was rejoined, just as Fafila arrived on the scene.

"Get away from here, son! This is my business!", yelled his father. Fafila did not insist, and turned back. At this moment, he was attacked by three infantrymen, who managed to unhorse him. They were about to hack him about when Gunderic arrived. The blond giant had been observing events and holding himself in readiness. In no time at all, he cut Fafila's three assailants to pieces with mighty blows of his broadsword.

"Gunderic, for the love of God, I owe you my life!", said the boy.

"My pleasure, I assure you . . . It's not every day one gets to save the Prince of Hispania!", replied Gunderic, with a laugh, helping him to his feet.

"Leave your father to it and don't worry. God is over this. He'll be all right, you'll see", added the general from Amaya.

In the meantime, Xilo was waiting for Musa's advance guard, hidden with his men among the slabs of stone littering the Auseva Pass. Froliuba and her friends, too, were tucked away behind a rocky spur, but the green-crested foot soldiers were not yet in view.

"Will we return home safe and sound, *domna* Froliuba?", began Felipo.

"I don't know. I really don't know, child . . . but please . . . don't address me in that way!", replied the young maid, bow firmly planted between her feet.

Felipo was quiet and looked at the other children nearby. They were all pale and tense with excitement. They really had little idea what was happening. Froliuba bitterly regretted having brought them with her. She looked at their frightened faces and wanted to cry. She would have given anything to be elsewhere. She had been wrong to pester Fafila to let them come. Now she realised that she would be responsible for their deaths.

She looked again at Felipo, Luterio, Reimund, Berto, Froaric, Euredo, Sabaric, Viaric, Guberic, Landeric and the others. What had she been thinking when she decided to bring these blond, blue-eyed children into such a hell? They looked at her in silence, none of them daring to complain. Like well-brought up children, they obeyed the orders of a person older than themselves without question, whether they were right or wrong. For them she was the future queen . . . that was what their parents had told them. And then, hidden in the larch woods of the other valley, they had seen her take on single-handed the black devil pursuing her. They were there partly to defend their queen. They were her bodyguards. Of course, they would take her home, and one day they would be her courtiers, maybe

even counts or dukes, rich and important people. But in any case, they would always serve her with the greatest devotion.

"Of course we'll be going home, Felipo!", said Berto, whose long hair came down to his shoulders under the little helmet with wings of horn given him by his grandmother.

"And all we have to do is fire our steel balls. We don't have to go anywhere near those big fellows!", commented Sabaric, huddled among the roots of a fir tree.

"That's right. You've got the idea", interrupted Froliuba. "Don't even dream of running towards those devils. Our soldiers are waiting for them below. All you need do is use your slings."

Now it seemed that their task was more manageable. But it did not allay her sense of guilt. She was only four years older than them, but it was as if they were her children—or rather, babies. Like the ones she had owned at the court of Toledo, when she spent hours dressing them in little suits of shining armour, of the kind worn by her father and his friends.

Suddenly, she burst into tears. This was all too much for her, and Fafila was far away, maybe dead. Maybe they had butchered him mercilessly. And what would her mother say? Where was she, anyway? Couldn't she have come, too? Had she really loved her husband? Her own love, at least, was real. She had avenged her father. Now she could at last meet him in heaven and he would take her in his arms and enfold her in the warmth of his magnificent white robe, adorned with diamonds and rubies, beside Jesus and all the beautiful angels of paradise. And they would always live together, happy ever after, with or without the encumbrance of a mother always silent and dressed in widow's weeds.

The sun had set when they at last felt the ground shaking. A few moments later, the girl saw Xilo wave towards his men, who squeezed even closer behind their boulders, lowering their heads and holding their weapons at the ready. At the same time, Froliuba dried her tears and gave a similar signal to her lads.

"Not a sound!", she mouthed.

The seconds passed. The wind blew round their heads and the air turned icy cold. The silence was broken by the cries of a pair of eagles circling over the nearest peaks. Then the first green crests appeared. The front ranks were dirty with dust and mud, but in good order. The Saracen

infantry marched confidently up the path, their officers walking stiffly beside them, warily inspecting the outlines of the greyish ridges. The captain in black who marched in front had also noticed the eagles, then he thought he detected a movement among the enormous boulders scattered on the steep lower slopes of those snow-capped peaks.

As he peered among the nooks and crannies, he heard a series of whistles rend the air. The pain he felt was sudden and agonisingly sharp. Froliuba's arrow had scored a direct hit in his midriff.

"It's an ambush! Retreat! Retreat!", yelled the other officers, as steel balls pinged off their helmets and the plates of their body armour.

"Let's turn back immediately!", roared a platoon commander, before he was stunned by a ball in the neck. In the moments that followed, the advancing army lost its coordination, as the soldiers turned and ran back down the slope they had so laboriously climbed.

But at that very moment, Xilo and his Asturians leaped out and attacked them with swords and axes. The action was short and sharp. The Saracens responded promptly, drawing their scimitars, but the Asturians, rested and confident, decimated the front ranks with ease. Xilo had managed to recover a javelin from goodness knows where and, wielding it with great skill, jabbed at his opponents right, left and centre, with the most terrifying cries.

News of the ambush spread like wildfire down the cart track, until it reached the ears of Musa and Abdul, who were still negotiating the ash thickets below.

"They are massacring us! They have attacked the front ranks!", shrieked a little standard bearer, who had lost his helmet. So the elderly Emir ordered the whole column to stop and withdraw, and take up defensive positions among the brambles and bushes of the thickets. But the advance guard of his army was now trapped among the rocks of the pass and there was little that could be done for them. Xilo's men had killed at least a hundred and were preparing to fall on the contingent behind them, when they realised the enemy had already retreated to some considerable distance.

Then Xilo appeared on the slope leading to the pass and began shouting:

"Come on! Come on up, you African cowards! Here I am waiting for you, Xilo, son of Xinto, from the land of the Luggoni!"

But his words only echoed in the void. Not a soldier was to be seen of the great army that had dared penetrate the mountain fastnesses of his

people. He stood watching for a while, then turned to the warrior beside him:

"Sindo. Tell the others to get back among the rocks. This means we shall be up here all night. I swear in God's name that they will never get through!"

Sindo sheathed his sword and approached the group of men in scale armour waiting excitedly on the brink of the pass.

"And don't forget", added the old grey-clad leader loudly. "Mind you send some bread and honey to those children. Tell them I am right proud of the skill they showed with their slings!"

Thus ended the Saracen attempt to cross the Auseva Pass. Froliuba was radiant.

"Good on you! We've done it!", she said, as she received a basket of spelt rolls and a jar of honey from one of Xilo's soldiers.

"And now can we go back home?" asked Felipo.

Froliuba looked at him, then at the others.

"We shall go home, child! We shall indeed go home!", replied the beautiful redhead, planting a kiss on his pink, wind-chilled cheek.

"If Allah so wills, this is your final day!", panted the Muslim general, thrusting the blade of his scimitar into his enemy's breast armour.

Pelayo did not appear to feel the impact and extended the point of his pike under Tariq's shield. The cutting edge of the weapon lodged in the bottom of the shield and, with a sharp tug, Pelayo sent it flying. Now it was scimitar against pike. Tariq was often forced backwards to avoid the stabbing action of the longer weapon. But he did not lose heart and continued to look for a way through Pelayo's guard that would enable him to deliver the fatal blow.

"Your God seems to have forgotten you, brother!", gasped the Visigoth Duke sarcastically.

"Allah does not forget his own!", replied the other, fruitlessly striking his scimitar on Pelayo's pike.

"And just suppose there was no Allah among these mountains?", replied Pelayo, parrying another blow. Now he really was gasping for breath.

"If he was there on the other river, he will also be here!", replied Tariq, backing away, also breathing heavily.

The pair were now exhausted and running with sweat, and the light was beginning to fade. Around them, the hellish struggle continued, though everything seemed to be happening in slow motion as weariness took hold.

It was no longer possible to count the mutilated and lifeless bodies on the banks of the stream and among the dense beds of cyclamens growing all around them. But the desire to prevail surged up again on both sides: the Muslims wanted to finish their conquest of Hispania once and for all; the Christians had to begin the reconquest. There was no possible compromise. It was a fight to the last man.

"And this is for the Prophet!", roared Tariq at a certain point, poking the point of his scimitar into Pelayo's right groin and withdrawing it. The Visigoth doubled up with pain as the blood ran down his leg.

"And this is for the glory of the Koran!", continued Tariq, now planting the blade of his weapon in the Christian's left shoulder.

Pelayo fell to his knees among the cyclamens. He felt his strength ebbing away and was about to let go of the pike.

"And this is for Allah, who is the only Truth!", concluded Tariq, as he prepared to strike the head off the now beaten warrior.

Pelayo closed his eyes and fumbled for the sapphire pendant he wore under his armour.

"I shall soon be with you, sister!", he murmured, then realised that the necklace was missing. Surprised, he opened his eyes again.

The Berber was still standing there, scimitar raised.

"What are you doing Tariq son of Ziyad? Aren't you going to finish your work?", asked the scar-faced veteran, his tawny hair blowing in the wind.

The other seemed not to hear him. He was looking upwards. Pelayo realised that the din of battle had ceased. He turned and saw that the others, too, had stopped fighting. Then he raised his eyes in the direction they all were looking. There She was! She had appeared on the highest peak!

CHAPTER XXXV

HOSANNA IN EXCELSIS DEO

Toribio was suddenly plunged into a mass of cold water. Below him there was total darkness. He tried to make his way back to the surface, struggling towards the light, and at last managed to get a lungful of air. Weighed down as he was, he swam towards a patch of reeds, then touched bottom. He was not far from the bank. Soaked through and shivering with cold and fear, he waded knee deep in water through the slimy mud and finally hauled himself out onto the bank, before losing consciousness.

When he awoke, the mist had gone. Before him stretched a vast silent expanse of green water, enclosed by tall walls of rocks tinged red by the rays of the setting sun. He got up and looked in the other direction. Riding along the jagged ridge of a silvery mountain side, he made out a platoon of blue-clad soldiers, . . . making their way down to him. The leader must be Munuza. Poor Fruela, he thought, they must have killed him. So he began crying out to the Virgin Mary, begging her to bring his friend back alive, together with his brave men.

Just as the squad of Berbers reached the shore of the lake not far away, he heard a sinister gurgling noise behind him. He turned and saw that the surface of the lake was disturbed. He continued to pray, and suddenly great waves welled up out of the depths and advanced towards the shore. The Berbers, too, saw what was happening and stopped. But the waves came on and swept half of them away, before they had time to turn their horses. Munuza managed to escape with the remainder of his men and immediately ordered them to ride back up the ridge. However, waves continued to break over the stragglers, dragging them into the lake, where they were swallowed up in an instant. Munuza spurred his horse and he and a few of his men managed to clamber up the pathway running parallel with the overhanging walls of rock. Then the waves ceased and the waters were again quiet and still.

At this point, giant figures emerged from the smooth, imposing rock face, approached the survivors of Munuza's platoon and began hurling

huge slabs of stone, crushing them in seconds. Munuza himself spurred his horse again, terrorised by what he was witnessing, and managed to get out of danger, disappearing behind a ledge of rock.

Here, the vain and lustful Saracen found a track leading down to a broad green meadow, with a spring-fed pool of dark, sinister water. In it cavorted women of splendid physique and feature, completely naked, singing a sensuous, haunting melody. Enthralled by this delightful vision, the heat of lust pervading his body, the Berber rode towards them, stopped and dismounted, determined to make the most of the opportunity. With their full rosy breasts and curvaceous, shapely bellies, they seemed to invite him to descend quickly into the water.

Munuza undressed and, fully aroused, waded towards the charming bevy of delightful, honey-skinned creatures. But when he came among them, anticipating the sweetness of their caresses and feeling the heady rush of blood to his extremities, he suddenly went under, totally helpless. Surrounded by the laughing, attentive women, he saw their eyes change colour and ugly wrinkles consume their soft, sensuous bodies. Unable to escape, Munuza felt sharp pain as they sank their long nails into him and began to tear at his skin.

The expression of surprise on his face was replaced by one of sheer terror. But it was too late. The claws of the deceitful witches were already working deep into his bowels, their powerful teeth stripping the flesh from his bones as if tearing up a piece of old rag. Then the oldest among them took hold of his writhing body, opened her jaws wide and, sinking her fangs into his neck, bit off his head—the *pièce de résistance* of the delectable feast planned by the Xanas of the Rio Deva.

Toribio was still standing on the lake shore. Plastered in mud, the young man in the green jerkin was unable to grasp what was happening. He looked around, overcome by a sense of desolation and impotence. There was total silence. The waters of the lake lay flat and still. The mountains towered solemn-faced over him. But this must be the place. This was undoubtedly the lake prophesied by King Roderic. It was here the Cross was to reappear. But how and when? Toribio had begun praying the Akathistos again, when suddenly he saw her.

The girl was still wearing the jewel-spangled gown she had worn at the monastery. The agate pendant lay on her breast like a cloud embraced by the dawn sky. The glow of her slightly tanned complexion was fully

restored, her face sweet and attractive as ever, with the magnificent lynx-like eyes and soft, mobile lips so similar to his own. Toribio's heart missed a beat, as her features lit up with a smile.

"So . . . it's you?", stammered the lad from Valle.

"Yes, Toribio, safe and sound, as you can see. I don't know what has happened, but it is wonderful to be with you again at last!", she replied, moving towards him.

Instinctively, they began to run, straight into each other's arms.

"This is all a miracle!", broke in Toribio. "You were in the clutches of that monster in Xixon! Your brother even made an attempt to rescue you. How is it possible that you are now here in my arms, more beautiful than ever?"

"Yet I don't remember anything, my love . . . except for a cross with a red stone . . . It is the only thing I remember from the long slumber I sank into at the church of the Angels of Love."

Then Agasinda looked over Toribio's shoulder at the scene behind him.

"This is the lake! It was here, right here that I saw it appear!", she said excitedly.

Toribio disengaged from her embrace and, taking her hand, himself surveyed those silent, secret waters.

"The Ruby Cross . . . It was there that I lost it, my love . . . in that ruined church . . . Don't you remember?", he sighed.

A shadow of regret crossed her face.

"Maybe we did wrong, Toribio . . . What we did together . . . we should have waited!"

He lowered his eyes.

"You've no idea how many times I have thought the same. I have lived in torment since I lost that sign of God's approval . . . and all for the sake of the desires of the flesh!", he concluded sadly.

"But it was sheer joy!", she replied, stroking his face.

"And so it was for me, my love . . . but it was still wrong. I see it clearly now", he continued, remembering Oppa's insinuations on the road to Xixon. "That act is the crowning of an infinitely greater love . . . a love that comes only from the Father and makes us equal to him . . . enabling us to create other creatures . . . living creatures like us!", he declared, staring at the lake.

"I'm also coming to see things in the light of reason", broke in Agasinda. "It is as if we had thrown away a king's crown, before he had come into his kingdom", she said.

Toribio looked at her for a moment, then broke into a smile.

"Only a person who really loves me would be prepared to share my guilt and alleviate my suffering with such words of wisdom", he declared.

"And I'll never meet another man prepared to go through the valley of death to have me back again!", she replied.

They embraced again.

"Let's ask God to forgive us, then, for the wrong we did, and let's live chastely until we can be married by his ministers and finally have all the children we desire!", murmured the girl.

"Amen to that!", replied Toribio.

He then invited her to kneel beside him and together they recited a *mea culpa.*

As they prayed, hand in hand, a melodious sound began to fill the rocky basin in which the lake was set, as if invisible fingertips were caressing the strings of a hundred harps. They smiled at each other, but continued praying. Then a trumpet blast rent the air, and a heavenly choir of hundreds of children's voices began singing quietly and swelled to a crescendo, causing the earth and mountains around them to tremble and shake. They tightened their grip on each other but, rather than fear, they experienced an intense happiness.

Suddenly the singing stopped and the waters of the lake receded. In just a few seconds, its bed was completely dry, as if there had never been a lake at all, just a rounded hollow clothed in emerald-green grass. To their amazement, an immense marble altar stood in its midst, and on it a gilded ciborium, shining like the sun. Then they saw a woman in snow-white raiment, about to open the ciborium. She was tall and statuesque, and her silky black hair hung loose on her shoulders, from which sprouted a pair of magnificent silver-feathered wings.

She opened the door of the ciborium and took out a light more intense even than the sun, so bright that the young people had to cover their eyes to avoid being blinded. Then she turned and began to cross the stretch of lawn towards them, barefoot and silent. As she approached, their hearts swelled with intense emotion. The light she carried in her hands was so dazzling, they could not make out her face. When she was within a few feet of the pair, who were still on their knees and clinging to one another,

the woman held out her arms and the light faded to allow them to see her features.

There she stood, beautiful and radiant as ever, with her chaste, finely shaped black eyes and the magnificent sapphire pendant displayed on her prominent bosom, like a drop of the bluest ocean on a bed of snow. And with supreme grace she raised the Ruby Cross, whose rich brilliance throbbed before them like that of an immaculate heart. Boy and girl broke into uncontrollable sobbing, overwhelmed by an emotion too intense for mortal senses. But Verosinda smiled and they were immediately reassured, as if caressed by a warm, gentle breeze.

"Do not cry, beloved, since through you Good had triumphed, and heaven is ringing with joyful applause", said the angelic ambassadress. "Here for you, Toribio Del Valle, is the sign of the love of Jesus, which you have deserved as a reward for your tenacity, courage and enduring humility", she continued, handing him the magical red cross.

Toribio was shaking from head to foot.

"But I have sinned countless times . . . I have given way to anger, hatred, the temptations of the flesh, and also to pride!", he stammered, broken and in tears.

"You have lapsed as all humans do in this fleeting life of theirs, which is tinier than a grain of sand in the infinity of God's universe, but you have managed to return to the way of Truth and redeem yourself in time, and this matters to God as much as his light itself", replied Verosinda.

"And you have grasped what few people have understood or will understand over the centuries . . . that Jesus is God and Man at one and the same time, and therefore his love for us is infinite and eternal!"

Toribio received the cross from her hands, kissed it and hugged it to his chest. Agasinda was still lost in a mute ecstasy.

"And what will happen to those who do not understand?", asked the young man, trembling still.

"Some, like you, will understand before they die, and they will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Others will understand later, but as they have made some effort to know the Truth, their spirits will be given time to grow before they are received by the Father. Others, sadly, will never understand, simply because they persist right to the end in not wanting to know, and their spirits will be extinguished when they die, like the flame of an empty oil lamp."

Toribio looked at the ground, saying nothing. Then he looked again at the angel standing before him.

"And what about my father? What will become of him?", he asked with heart-felt concern.

Verosinda smiled again.

"I knew you would ask me that question, my treasure", she said. "I can tell you that your father, partly through your efforts, has come to the Truth and will live with us, your mother and all the angels and archangels, in the presence of Him who is True Love!"

At these words, Toribio's cares melted away. Now he knew his father would be all right. Now at last he could get on with his mission. As if reading his thoughts, Verosinda kissed him on the forehead. Toribio felt a spirit of warmth and beauty pervade his physical body.

"When I leave, you must recite that prayer again, my treasure", continued Verosinda. "Our Most Holy Mother has always listened to you and soon she will appear among these mountain peaks!"

Then she approached Agasinda and kissed her on the forehead, too.

"And you, my child, will be a woman of blessing and will have five children from your Toribio. The firstborn you will call Fernando, and one day his grandchildren will build a magnificent castle and give birth to a race which has no end!"

Agasinda would have likes to hug her aunt for joy, but Verosinda was already taking wing.

"Hosanna in highest heaven!", was all she managed to say, as Verosinda blew her another kiss. Then the winged creature turned and vanished from sight.

Agasinda looked at Toribio, her eyes still full of tears.

"This is the most wonderful day of my life", she said.

"Of our life!", replied the young man, and immediately he knelt down, raised the cross heavenwards and began the prayer his mother had taught him.

"Rejoice, eternally Virgin Bride!",

at which point the great marble altar began to shake in the midst of the green meadow,

"Rejoice, radiance that enlightens men's souls;
Rejoice, joy of all generations;
Rejoice, dwelling of the infinite God;

Rejoice, One at whom the angels marvel",
now the waters of the lake flowed back over the carpet of grass.

"Rejoice, voice of the Apostles never silent;
Rejoice, awesome slayer of demons;
Rejoice, defence against invisible enemies;
Rejoice, through you the curse is broken",
at which the earth shook.

"Rejoice, because you restore men's souls;
Rejoice, because you bring reconciliation where there is discord;
Rejoice, because you plundered the kingdom of the dead;
Rejoice, because through you comes the blazing light".
The shaking intensified. Rocks began to slide and fall from the mountain slopes. Enormous boulders rolled down into the waters. The woods swayed and shivered, like bellows filled by a strong blast of air. Birds rose and flew as high as they could reach, earth-bound creatures huddled in their caves, insects hid themselves away, fish fled to the depths of their watery realm.

"Rejoice, eternally Virgin Bride!"

As Toribio pronounced the final words, the ruby projected an enormous red ray which lit up the whole of the basin and was reflected on the slopes of the mountains. They in turn directed the light heavenwards, embracing the moon, which was timidly attempting to take the place of the sun. Then there was a loud trumpet blast, and the singing of angel choirs rent the sky, which was again as bright and transparent as in full daylight.

"HOSANNA IN EXCELSIS DEO!",

rang out the greeting. At this point, an enormous gilt cross appeared on the altar and Toribio realised he could no longer hold the Ruby Cross. It escaped from his hands and flew upwards, changed into a blazing nail, then swooped down towards the altar and buried itself in the gilt cross.

And as the angels sang, the waters returned, submerging the altar and the hollow in which it stood.

From the sinking cross emerged another ray of light, which lit up the highest peak of the surrounding mountains, right beside the Auseva Pass.

Then the angelic singing intensified, and finally She appeared, the Blessed Virgin.

Never in the history of creation had so beautiful a woman been seen. Bright shining as a star. Fresh and pure as a mountain spring. Graceful and

elegant as a gazelle. Fragrant and sweet-smelling as a rose. On her head she wore a diamond crown.

"ET BENEDICTUS QUI VENIT IN NOMINE DEI!",

concluded the angels.

The Virgin looked down from the mountain top. Then she raised her right hand and pointed to the sky. And so the Third Event took place in all its glory, and once again Love conquered Evil.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TRIUMPH OF THE FAITH

"What miracle is this?", exclaimed the handsome, dark-complexioned warrior, his narrow eyes still fixed on the majestic, dazzling image on the mountain top.

"It is the Blessed Virgin, my African brother! Can't you believe your eyes?", replied Pelayo, enraptured by the dramatic apparition.

Tariq seemed confused.

"I've never seen anything like it, not in a thousand battles! And it is quite beyond me to understand what is happening. But I feel it is the will of Allah we stop fighting. If this is his will, I cannot gainsay it. That would be blasphemy!", he said, putting up his scimitar.

Pelayo realised his opponent was interpreting the event in the only way his religion permitted.

"And what if your Allah wanted us to be brothers and live at peace in the world he has created?", asked the Christian Duke, still down on his knees.

Tariq was visibly shaken, but continued: "You do not read the Koran and I am sure you deny what it says, like so many infidels, so I ought to kill you. Allah blesses the man who defends the true faith!"

"And what if your Allah wanted you to be merciful and you did not heed him?", returned Pelayo.

"Pardon an infidel who denies what belongs to Allah!", replied the Muslim in irritation.

But Pelayo found just the right words rise to his lips: *"This is what the Powerful Omniscient One reveals to you and those who were before you: to Him belongs what is in the heavens and what is on earth, and He is the Most Excellent, the Sublime One. And the heavens are almost rent from above, when the angels sing the praise of the Lord and ask pardon for the inhabitants of the earth: is not God Indulgent and Merciful?"*

The devout Muslim was taken aback by this faultless quotation of the Surah of Consultation.

He lowered his blade and slowly continued: *"But as for those who have taken other lords but God, God watches them, and you do not have to be their protector . . ."*

Pelayo was still observing him.

"Just so. Your Koran says it clearly, and I most definitely have not taken any lords other than God . . .", said the man with the cobalt-blue eyes.

Tariq was even more perplexed and, if truth be told, so was Pelayo. Both were overcome by an irresistible desire to make an end of all this violence. A mysterious force over which they had no control seemed to have magically taken hold of their hearts and minds. Tariq had never doubted the words of the Koran, but now he felt the Truth could not coincide literally with what, after all, had been written by a mere man. Pelayo, for his part, had not read a single Surah of the sacred book, yet he seemed able to quote it word perfectly. What was happening to them?

The shining image vanished and they heard the note of a horn. The echo resounded full and mellow throughout the valley and everyone turned to the east, where dusk was falling. There, on the grim, darkening slopes of the Monsacri, they made out the shapes of tens of thousands of horsemen—small but muscular figures, clad in splendid coats of mail over green jackets and white breeches. They carried long, flat, oval shields, red in colour, like the broad sashes doubling their leather belts. Their steel helmets were crowned with hawk-shaped crests. They wore long beards and hair which swung on their shoulders in heavy braids. Wrapped in amaranthine capes, they brandished sharp-pointed two-edged swords.

Ahead of them rode two men on splendid white steeds, carrying banners of red, white and green. One had a thick white beard and looked at least eighty. The other was younger, with a thin, hatchet-like face. They had come: the Vasconians of Momo, Patriarch of Pamplona, and his son Eneko, Count of Calahorra. The Blessed Virgin had performed a true miracle, reconciling the irreconcilable.

At this awesome sight, the Berber soldiers began murmuring to one another. They spoke to their officers, who consulted together. They had few options: outnumbered two to one, they could but surrender and leave the field. Finally, a blue-clad officer ran to Tariq, who was still facing Pelayo in the waters of the ford. The Berber general had no illusions. He approved his lieutenant's request and turned again to the Christian leader.

"So be it, then, Pelayo son of Fafila! Today this is the will of Allah, and Allah does what he wills. I surrender and will depart with my men!", said the warrior in black.

Pelayo smiled and replied:

"Do not take it badly, young man of valour! This is not a straightforward war between men, but something far greater . . . and only the love of God can bring it to an end one day!"

Tariq finally caved in under the weight of his emotions. Not even a tough, steel-tempered nature such as his could withstand the intensity of the spirit of grace flooding his being. So he knelt down in front of the Christian, took his hands, looked him in the eyes and said: "I thank you for your words, brother of Hispania, and swear by Allah that my blade will never again seek to do you harm. But now let me go and conduct my remaining men to safety."

For the first time in many years, the cobalt-blue eyes shone with joy. Pelayo got to his feet, his wounds miraculously healed. He was the winner, after all. He looked again towards the peak where the Virgin Mary had appeared, then surveyed the superb Vasconian army, then the weary mud-spattered, blood-streaked men who had begun gathering to him. Finally, he replied:

"And I bless you for your humility, soldier of Allah and new-found brother. My blade shall not seek out your heart again, and now you may return safe and sound with your army to the land from whence you came. And who knows if one day God will allow us to drink to peace between the peoples of Hispania and Africa!"

Tariq listened without showing the slightest emotion, but a large tear ran down his right cheek.

"So be it! May Allah bless the merciful and forgive the arrogant!", he said.

Then he rose, called his men together and, giving them their marching orders, set off southwards. Subdued and silent, the great blue-clad host returned by the way it had come, so recently singing proud hymns in anticipation of the battle. As the last of the Muslims vacated the Cyclamen Valley, the Christian soldiers lit torches and began to celebrate their victory with shouts of joy.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the mountain, Toribio and Agasinda were climbing the barren, stony path leading to the pass, when Fruela

suddenly appeared on the crest of a bracken-covered rise. The young Asturian's breastplate was unlaced and his cloak torn, but he was still carrying his sword and bear-emblem shield. His Roman helmet, too, still sat proudly on his broad forehead.

"Commander, commander! You are still alive, by the grace of God!", he yelled, and began running towards them.

"And the Blessed Virgin has been gracious to you, too. That I see clearly, Fruela son of Froila!", replied the warrior in the still wet and mud-stained green jerkin.

The two of them embraced.

"And I live to see you, too, *domna* Agasinda! What a joyous miracle! Just as I left you at the Church of the Angels of Love . . .", continued the Asturian, suddenly falling silent. "I shall never forgive myself for my cowardice that day. I took to my heels like a rabbit . . . despite having a squad of ten men to protect you and your aunt", he said, letting his arms hang loose and lowering his eyes.

"No one is born lion-hearted, Fruela son of Froila", broke in the great general's daughter. "Courage is something we have to find for ourselves and in our own way. And so you have done! The man I see before me now is Fruela the Great, future general of the Asturians, no longer the boy we first met at Santa Maria de Monsacri", she concluded.

The youngster raised his head and smiled happily, gazing into her splendid lynx-like eyes.

"And I see before me the count and countess who will one day govern the lands of Cantabria, *domna* Agasinda, a couple I shall be glad to honour whenever they come as guests to your father's future royal palace", he replied, falling to his knees.

Agasinda stroked his hair and urged him to get up.

"We must make haste to the pass! This is a day of miracles and enchantments, but we do not know if everything will go in our favour to the very end", said Toribio, struck by a sense of foreboding, as he helped Fruela to lace up his body armour.

On the way, Toribio recounted what he had seen in the last few hours, with the exception, as always, of the Ruby Cross. Agasinda did not interrupt, as if she had already accepted the role of faithful witness, obedient only to her man. Fruela was amazed by the account of the waves from the lake

and the way in which the giants of Ezla had destroyed Munuza's men one by one.

"And you really think that Munuza got away?", asked the Asturian.

"God knows if he is still alive, but I saw him gallop to safety behind that wall of rock", replied Toribio, pointing to the towering stone slabs from which the giants had hurled their boulders.

"Then may his soul rest in peace!", replied the other, shaking his head.

"Why? Do you know what is behind it?", asked Agasinda.

"Certainly I do, though I have never been there! That route is out of bounds. It leads from the Auseva Pass to the source of the Deva. Only the foolish would venture that way. The old folk say it is home to the ugliest and wickedest Xanas of all the Asturias!"

Toribio and Agasinda were awed. Clearly, God had reserved a special punishment for the greedy, lustful Saracen. The girl suddenly had a vivid impression of the governor's fine, well-modelled physique and thanked God her brother had arrived in time to save her from being violated. Once again, the meaning was clear: God had willed that it should not happen. He had reserved her for another man. And she wondered if everything that had happened in those weeks was not just a chapter in a great story written in heaven before time began.

However those amazing and awe-inspiring events had been ordered, Agasinda finally felt at peace. She was certain of being restored to purity, of being on God's side. Almost instinctively, she sought Toribio's hand. He gave it a squeeze, as if he had read her thoughts.

"And the white lady on the mountain top? Did you see her, Fruela?", asked the lad in the green jerkin, curious to know how the miracle had been interpreted by others, and whether Fruela had understood it was the Blessed Virgin.

The Asturian confirmed that he, too, had seen her.

"Yes, it must have been the Virgin Mary. Who else could it be?", he replied, the emotion of the event again causing his heart to rise.

"As you say, Fruela. It was her indeed. Today is truly a day of wonders, but let's hurry to join the others, before night overtakes us."

It was now obvious that everyone must have seen her, Pelayo, Uncle Petro, the Cantabrian chieftains and also his father. At the thought, Toribio felt a sharp pain in his breast, but it could not be the cross—that was now back with Jesus.

"Let's make haste!", he urged. "I feel that God's will is not yet fully accomplished . . . I want to know what else awaits us over this mountain", he concluded, quickening his pace among the rocks of the desolate path.

Xilo and his men received him in celebratory mood, all carrying lighted torches. Froliuba and her lads were there, too.

"God be praised! You, too, have survived this day of marvels!", said the old grey warrior, still grasping his javelin.

Froliuba immediately recognised the maiden in the pink gown and ran to embrace her. Fruela finally sheathed his sword and approached the other Asturians, who greeted him warmly and offered him wine.

"Xilo of the Luggoni and Froliuba! If you and your men are safe and sound, it means Musa's Saracens have halted their advance!", broke in Toribio.

"Halted? Cut and run, more like it! Climb up on this rock with me for a good view", urged Xilo, anxious to lead Toribio to the top of a small rocky promontory.

Screwing up his eyes, the younger man saw thousands of torches ebbing away from the Plain of Rock-falls, disappearing into the ravine at its foot and heading towards Galicia.

Xilo laid his rough and dirty hand on Toribio's right shoulder.

"And our Berber friends who were waiting for us on the other side of the pass are also making their departure. Didn't you hear the long horn-blast of the Vasconians?", enquired the old warrior.

A sudden shudder ran through Toribio. The feeling that something terrible had happened in the Cyclamen Valley during his absence was now gaining the upper hand over the joy of realising that they, the Christians, had finally prevailed. He must find his father as soon as possible.

"You've arrived just in time. We are about to go and join them!", added Xilo.

"Let's get a move on, then!", urged Toribio, running to borrow a torch to guide him to the immense purple meadow that awaited, blood-soaked, in the darkness.

In less than half an hour, the Asturians, with Toribio, Agasinda, Froliuba and her young followers, reached the banks of the Dobra. Such were the heaps of bodies, armour, shields, weapons and helmets of all kinds, they did not even realise they had entered its waters. In front of

them, Toribio glimpsed Gunderic talking with Fafila. In the torch light, he also saw Pelayo, together with the Swabian counts, shaking hands with two green-clad horsemen carrying lofty standards. He recognised the face of Count Eneko and assumed that the elderly man, bald with a long beard and clad in leather and steel, was the Patriarch Momo in person. Emotions were running high. Never would he have expected to see these people together on such a day as this—laughing and exchanging brotherly hugs, as if the bitter memory of centuries of warfare and hatred had been swept away.

While Froliuba rushed to embrace Fafila and Agasinda ran towards Pelayo, who was radiant with joyful surprise, Toribio searched in vain for his father. But Hernando was nowhere to be seen, though he made out the painted faces of a number of Cantabrians, mingling with other relieved, laughing Visigoths. As Toribio waded through the shallow waters of the Dobra, approaching the northern bank, he recognised the characteristic deer-antler helmet worn by Origeno. The muscular giant was listening to the excited account of a half-naked man, green with a black hood, who carried a long bow over his shoulder: no mistaking Alia of the Avaragini. So he, too, had come through alive, God be praised, but there was still no sign of Hernando.

Toribio ranged along the bank of the stream, following the trail of bloody corpses, which seemed to peter out towards the East. The two Cantabrian chieftains did not notice the young man with the green jerkin and lion medallion as he passed by, and he had no inclination to interrupt them. It was as if his spirit were detached from the dreadful reality around him. He walked wide-eyed and silent among the heaps of arms, legs, dead horses and riders, iron and wickerwork shields, scimitars and broadswords, single and double-headed axes, wooden and steel clubs, lances and javelins, blue, red and white banners, barely breathing. His heart beat faster and faster. He did not even notice that a stocky man with yellow-painted chest and long curly hair held by a black band was trying to catch up with him. Virone of the Conisci, his father's great friend, put out a hand to stop him, but Toribio shrugged off the well-intentioned gesture.

Now he knew: his father was over there, among the juniper bushes and oak scrub. He knew who it was lying in the arms of his Uncle Petro, as the Duke knelt like a marble statue in the light of the torches held by Pelayo's spatharii. Toribio felt breathless, his legs gave way under him and tears welled up in his eyes. His father lay between Petro's knees, wrapped

in the burly Visigoth's wolf skin. Petro was holding his head in his iron gauntlets. Hernando lay there motionless, his eyes closed. Nearby, on the grass, lay his short sword and ridiculous leather cap with the bunch of crow's feathers.

His uncle looked up. His bulbous eyes met those of the youngster whose lion medallion matched the belt buckle of the man he was supporting. There was a moment's silence, then Petro spoke in an almost inaudible whisper:

"He died calling your name, dear nephew."

At this, Toribio collapsed on his father's body like an empty sack. He ran his hands over his lifeless chest, his arms, and finally his bearded, still-warm face. Slowly he caressed his cheeks, his forehead, his ears and eyelids. The tears fell from his eyes like so many diamonds, sparkling in the light of the torches, splashed on Hernando's leather breastplate and trickled down around the splendid green malachite pendant.

And as Toribio repeatedly stroked the eyes and eyebrows that for so many years had observed him with severity and tenderness, as only the eyes of a true father can, his uncle gently untied the necklace and placed it around his nephew's neck.

"Leave me alone with him!", said Toribio, continuing to gaze on his father's face.

The old Duke placed Hernando's head between the hands of his son and slowly got up. He exchanged a few words with the spatharii, then moved towards Virone and the other soldiers, who looked on in silence.

All of them had come. The news had spread like wildfire. Pelayo was there with Fafila, Agasinda, Froliuba and Gunderic, but none of them dared approach, out of respect for Toribio's profound suffering. All the Cantabrian chieftains were present: Virone, Origeno, Alia, Tridio and Talanio were on their knees, silently weeping. Xilo and Fruela also stood nearby, sharing their grief. The Swabian counts had come over and, removing their helmets, began to pray. Count Eneko concealed his face in the hood of his cloak. His elderly father knelt down as close as possible.

For all of them had come to love the Judge from the backwoods. They had all known—and no doubt detested—him as a gruff and surly fellow, but now felt a great sense of loss. He had played a part in all their lives. His oaths and rough words had overcome all their hesitations. His courage had frequently aroused them from their torpor. His blazing but fundamentally

kind and compassionate eyes had reminded them of the duties of a true father, a true judge of his people, a true leader.

And his reputation, too, had grown in the course of time, no longer provoking scornful laughter but expressions of respect and sympathy. For all could see the strength of the attachment between father and son. And, in their heart of hearts, all longed to be loved and honoured in like manner by their children, and would have liked to love and honour their parents in the same way, if to do so were still possible.

Slowly and silently, all those knights, soldiers and warriors began to file past the body cradled in Toribio's arms. Virone approached first, removed his legendary black headband and placed it on his friend's chest; Tridio dropped a fine amber bracelet at his feet; Talanio slipped off his crows' beak necklace and placed it alongside him; Origeno offered his horse-shaped amulet, Alia his bird-skull necklace. Many of the warriors formerly led by Talanio, Atia, Aluane and Turenno also came to pay homage and donate pieces of jewellery.

Then it was the turn of the Asturians. Xilo son of Xinto presented his sword. So did Fruela son of Froila, having first placed his hand on the right shoulder of his friend Toribio. The Asturians were followed by the Swabians, who saluted Hernando's body, recited a *requiescat in pace* and solemnly withdrew. Their place was taken by Count Eneko, who came with the Patriarch Momo.

"Forgive me, cousin. In the end, I did what you said, but heaven took you before we could be properly reconciled. I will make sure your mother knows", whispered the thin man with the emaciated face, who wore the same colours as Hernando's son. His father, Momo, laid the Vasconian flag beside his relative, also recited a *requiescat* and slowly backed away.

Then came the soldiers of the Autrigonian contingent. The young men from Valle and the neighbouring villages uttered their prayer in unison, then, with perfect timing, grasped their spears and planted them in the ground, before standing to attention alongside the spatharii. Then came Pelayo and Fafila. The two Visigoth noblemen knelt down, prayed, and placed their cloaks on Hernando's knees. Froliuba stroked Toribio's head and placed her fine longbow beside him. Gunderic addressed the Judge in these words: "Glory to you, Count of Valle! May Heaven receive the man who began the long journey that has led me to this victory!" In response, many Visigoth soldiers and Cantabrian warriors began shouting: "Glory, glory, glory!"

Then it was the turn of Petro. Hernando's brother-in-law was still in tears:

"May God always keep you in glory, beloved brother, and may you finally be reunited with the sublime and holy woman I delivered to you, and live with her happily for all eternity", he said, planting his long broadsword at his feet. Then he removed his wolf skin coat and placed it over the cloaks left by Pelayo and his son. Agasinda was the last to pay homage to her young man's father. She knelt down beside Toribio, reached for his hand and, with him, recited a *requiescat* and a verse from the Akathistos.

To the amazement of the assembled company, as the two young people raised their hymn to the Madonna, Hernando's body began to quiver and was surrounded by a bright halo. Immediately, the twelve spatharii approached and lowered their visors to reveal faces of great beauty and radiance. They then laid down their lances and formed a guard of honour, six on each side. With extreme grace and gentleness, they bent down, grasped Hernando's body and rested it on their shoulders. Finally, to the sound of celestial music and the sweet scent of the cyclamens that filled the valley, they took flight heavenwards.

No one dared speak for a long time. Eventually, Pelayo, son of Fafila and leader of the Visigoths, approached Toribio, who was still watching the sky, where the twelve apostles bearing his father were now a distant, luminous speck. On the ground, in place of Hernando's body, lay nothing but a cross-shaped piece of oak.

"Toribio, what does this mean?", asked the victor of the battle that was to be known by the name of Covadonga.

Still on his knees, Toribio looked him in the eye, his expression was now calm and joyful.

"It simply means that, by intercession of the Blessed Virgin, God has decided to forgive our sins and save us forever. So he has done for my father. So he will do for each of us, if we are worthy of it!", replied the new Count of Valle.

Pelayo picked up the oak cross and looked up towards the stars and moon. The luminous streak was still visible.

"This is a holy day for us all. And so it will be for Hispania in the centuries to come!", proclaimed the general, raising his voice. "And since we have been protected by the caves of these mountains and the light of

our Most Holy Virgin, this shall be known as the victory of the Cavae Dominicae", he continued, waving the cross heavenward.

At this, there was general rejoicing: "Glory to God, to the Virgin Mary and to Hispania", they all cried.

"And glory to the King of Hispania!", cried Toribio, drawing his sword and pointing to the venerable warrior with the cobalt-blue eyes. "Glory to King Pelayo! Glory to the King of Hispania! Glory to the King of Hispania!", they all shouted in unison . . . Cantabrians, Asturians, Swabians, Vasconians and Visigoths.

Thus ended the epic story of the Battle of Covadonga, marking the beginning of the glorious kingdom of Spain, which lives on to this day, prosperous and free, under the eyes of our Most Holy Father, the protection of our Most Holy Mother and the patronage of the Most Holy Apostle James the Great.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE FINAL FAREWELL

Night had fallen before Xilo of the Luggoni and the Patriarch Momo, at Pelayo's request, gave orders for horns to be blown and beacons lit on the surrounding mountain tops. Groups of Asturian and Vasconian warriors immediately set off to perform the task. On reaching the passes, the men in green jackets and red sashes placed their long horns on the ground, raised the mouthpieces to their lips and blew for all they were worth. The echoes spread quickly from the Cyclamen Valley throughout the surrounding mountains.

Then they built beacons. Those lit by Xilo and Fruela's men on the Auseva Pass were seen by shepherds bivouacking on the Rouna Mountains, where they had already been awakened by the sound of the horns. The shepherds lit their own beacons, which were seen in turn by the hermits of the Monsacri. From here, further lights blazed up throughout the Asturian massif, reaching the coast at Villa Vitiosa and Riva de Sella in the north and the Magdalena and Corona passes in the south. To the west, the bonfires were seen as far as Oviedo, and even further afield in Galicia; to the east, at the fort of the Reina Pass. The fires multiplied in the gradually clearing darkness, until they were spotted by the monks standing sentry on the towers of the monastery of San Martín.

Then the ringing of bells spread along the valley of the Deva, reaching the monasteries of Cosgaya and Acquae Calidae, the villages of Panes, Santa Juliana, Santa Olalia, San Vicente, San Paulo, and finally the bastions of the walls of Porto Vereasueca. People hurriedly forsook their beds to find out what was going on. In their excitement, the younger peasants roused their children. The older ones knelt in their doorways and gazed heavenwards. Never in all their lives had they heard such a combination of sounds. By the third hour of the morning, all the churches and chapels of Cantabria and the Asturias were ringing out victory. People were pouring into the streets and dancing to the rhythm of tambourines, castanets and zithers.

Gaudiosa and Isilde were still dozing in their litter, when Adriano woke them: "Victory bells, *domna* Gaudiosa!", cried the hirsute Hispano-Roman retainer.

The Visigoth noblewoman looked at Isilde, who was sitting opposite her.

"God be praised! They have done it!", she exclaimed, overcome with excitement.

Isilde did not reply, but her eyes were full of joy. The two women embraced.

"Quick! Let's return to Cangas!", commanded the Duchess.

Adriano gave orders to halt the caravan and turn around. The hundreds of peasant farmers and share-croppers and their families who had fled with them were only too glad to obey. So the procession reformed and set off back to the Asturias, followed by the wagons sent by Count Sancho. Their drivers, wearing the Neptune livery, had also decided to retrace their steps.

It was evening before they entered Cangas. Here they found all the survivors of the battle, who had come down from the Plain of Rock-falls bearing the bodies of the fallen. Gaudiosa was reunited with her husband, son and daughter on the threshold of their beautiful white villa. She kissed her heroic general in the presence of the deeply affected crowd, then embraced her daughter, safe at last.

Isilde meanwhile embraced Froliuba and held her tight for a long while.

"Well done, your father will be proud of you!", she said.

Then she turned her attention to Pelayo.

"Thank you" was all she said to the grizzled old knight with the cobalt-blue eyes.

Pelayo smiled and replied: "Your Teodomir was also up there with us!"

Isilde burst into tears, still holding on to her darling child, who at last was firmly bonded to her.

"It is finished! It is finished!", she cried, almost in hysterics, as if freed from an enormous burden of pain and hatred.

Meanwhile, Agasinda was trying to tell her mother what she had witnessed.

"Later, later, my treasure! Now you need to rest! And thank God he has saved you from those devils!", said Gaudiosa.

"And here is the man who lost his father up there!", sadly announced the girl in the pink gown.

Toribio was standing slightly apart, in silence. Gaudiosa burst into tears and ran to embrace him, too. The young man let her clasp him to her breast.

"I was the last to see him alive. And I also saw the Holy Apostles carry him away to his heavenly mansion!", broke in the deep voice of Uncle Petro, also in tears.

"I would never have believed such things could happen!", replied Gaudiosa, overwhelmed with sadness.

"But it did happen, and you cannot imagine the other things that took place up there, *domna* Gaudiosa!", replied Toribio, still deeply affected by what he had seen.

"You may call me mother, my child!", replied the Duchess.

Toribio seemed not to understand her meaning.

"And call me father!", added the iron-clad knight in the red cloak beside her.

Agasinda threw herself into Toribio's arms.

"My blessing on your love for each other, my children!", pronounced the old Duke from Toledo. And the people standing around began to shout their names.

So it was true, thought Toribio. Up there, in heaven, someone had willed these events. His friend Valerio had been proved right in saying that one day he would marry the most beautiful woman in all Hispania. That day was fast drawing near.

The funerals began next morning. Overnight, folk had arrived from all the towns and villages of the eastern Asturias, now firmly in Christian hands. But there were also many families from the neighbouring Cantabrian valleys, especially those around the monastery of San Martín, each led by their priests, or simply by the monks living in the neighbourhood.

At dawn, Abbot Paciano, with the help of his brother monks, including the pharmacist Sisisclo and his helpers Vicentio and Prudentio, opened the tombs of the Roman legates and patricians which stood, hidden in the long grass, on the slope descending from the little orange church towards Cangas.

The funeral procession started from the threshold of Pelayo's villa at around the third hour. The sun was shining and it was already warm. The Visigoth general led the way, wearing a long tunic of black velvet, spangled with amethysts and lapis-lazuli, and held in at the waist by the belt with the eagle-shaped buckle. In place of his cloak, he wore only a silver-grey shawl, which barely covered his back, with white gloves and short bear-skin boots. His head was graced with a circlet of shining silver, studded with topazes, opals and sapphires.

Beside him, silent and serious, walked his son Fafila, dressed in purple, his wife Gaudiosa, in a long yellow gown, Agasinda, wrapped in a long robe of the same colour and covered in cherry blossom, the child Ermesinda, also in yellow, Duke Peter, in his customary wolf-skin cloak, General Gunderic, clad in white and wearing the red cloak in which he had fought the battle, Froliuba and her mother, also attired in yellow and adorned with cherry blossom, then all the family retainers, wearing purple garments and wreaths of laurel leaves.

They were followed in turn by the biers of the most famous warriors, in particular Liuva and Teudiselo, whose bodies had been washed, oiled and perfumed with extracts of myrtle and juniper. They had been dressed in silver coats of mail and laid on white linen sheets, surrounded by their weapons and peacock's fan shields, then virtually smothered in golden jewellery, amber necklaces, and glass-paste, agate and emerald armlets.

Similar treatment was accorded to the Asturian warriors who followed, borne up on the robust shoulders of their fellow-soldiers and led by Xilo, dressed entirely in white, and Fruela, in Roman uniform. Also there were Milio of the Pembeli and Naelio of the Paesici, who had managed to save a thousand men from the defeat at Villa Flaviana and Villa Maior, taking refuge in the valleys of the Rio Nalón and the Rio Caelao. The Asturian knights marched in silence, fully armed, alongside the families of the slain.

They were followed by the three Swabian counts, Ricimir, Filimir and Gildimir, with their mauve-clad soldiers, sad and solemn as they escorted their former companions. At the rear came Toribio, in his usual green jerkin, and some thirty of his father's young warriors who had survived the battle of the Cyclamen Valley. Last of all came Patriarch Momo of Pamplona, his son Eneko and the drivers of Count Sancho's wagons. The remainder of the Vasconian army had been sent home. Leaving the eastern front unguarded was too great a risk, but Momo and Eneko had insisted

on staying, to honour Petro and Pelayo, but above all out of respect for Toribio, his father Hernando and grandmother Amagoya, a pure-blooded Vasconian.

Last of all came an enormous throng of peasant farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, clergy and shepherds, maybe a thousand families in all, including old folk and children, who spilled onto the verges of the broad path leading to the burial ground.

Up there, on the eastern slope of the gentle hollow in which Cangas lay, were Pelayo's four hundred Visigoth horsemen and the hundred infantrymen from Amaya who has survived the recent slaughter. They were arrayed in shining armour, on the flowering meadow that lapped around the tumuli. Nearby were Milio and Naelio's thousand Asturian horsemen, with those commanded by Xilo and Fruela who had fought on the Plain of Rock-falls. In a corner apart were Froliuba's twenty young slingers, washed and brushed and accompanied by their proud parents. Froliuba looked in their direction and all of them, led by Felipo, greeted her with a wave of the hand.

Around the fifth hour, under a clear, topaz-coloured sky, smoke began to rise from the first pyres, which had been erected on the meadowland surrounding the little orange church. People cheered as the flames took hold, consuming the dozens of Visigoth, Cantabrian and Swabian warriors whose bodies had been recovered from the Plain of Rock-falls and the Cyclamen Valley. There was not enough space to bury all the fallen, and Pelayo had decided that their souls should be released following the ancient rites. The monks had not opposed this pagan custom, because it was not possible to accord the heroes individual burial, and they did not want to cast their bodies into a common grave. Most believed the spirits of the dead would find their way to heaven more quickly in this way, and cared little for Roman prescriptions regarding inhumation.

For a moment, the Visigoths and Asturians present thought they had gone back in time, to the days of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, when cremation was still a common practice. Stirred by instincts that had lain dormant, many of the older folk began to sing snatches of hymns they had learned from their elders when they were children. Some of the young people began playing tambourines and flutes and, in response, many young Visigoth and Asturian women removed their veils, sandals

and over-garments and began dancing, bare-armed and bare-legged. Their Celtic blood was not to be denied, the bodies of the living experiencing catharsis in celebrating the reunion of their loved ones with the heavenly powers.

Abbot Paciano and his monks observed this display of barbarism without too much concern. They knew that the teachings of the Church would take centuries to become firmly established in these valleys. But time was on their side. God had given them cause for hope. The darkness of chaos seemed to be drawing to an end and the dawning of a new age of light was at hand—an age of Christian progress.

The monks therefore had no hesitation in leading the funeral cortege to the tombs they had opened at first light. Pelayo had decided that the most distinguished of the dead should be buried in this way, lying with the illustrious Roman proconsuls. Slowly the bodies of Liuva and Teudiselo and the other Visigoth and Swabian officers were carried down into the ancient turf and daisy-covered burial mounds. Meanwhile, the crowd began throwing hazelnut twigs, maple leaves and plum blossom, while the choristers strummed lyres and sang Latin odes.

Gaudiosa and Pelayo followed Paciano down a stairway decorated with reliefs of intertwined serpents, fish and trailing ivy, until they reached a large chamber supported by pillars whose Roman capitals were still intact. Here, to their amazement, they found long rows of marble sarcophagi, figured with seashells and Olympian divinities and inscribed with texts and exhortations. Paciano and Sisisclo laid the bodies of Liuva and Teudiselo in an enormous pink sarcophagus, said a prayer and swung their censers to release fragrant incense. Pelayo, Gaudiosa, Petro, Gunderic, Toribio, Agasinda, Fafila, Froliuba, Isilde and Ermesinda were all on their knees before the majestic tombs. The pagan drumming continued outside. Time stood still. The victory of the Cavae Dominicae would never be forgotten. Their descendants' descendants would remember this day for all eternity.

When he emerged, Pelayo was surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd. Hundreds of men, women and children began shouting: "Glory to Pelayo! Glory to the King of Hispania!". Many approached to embrace him. The old general took in his arms a little girl of Ermesinda's age, also with blond tresses and apple-red cheeks. Women dressed in long black robes pelted him with plum blossom. An old man gave him a silver necklace, a young lad an amber bracelet. A girl handed him a bowl of myrtle ointment.

Pelayo used it to sooth the scars on his face, then kissed the girl and sent her back to her parents.

He then went on to the little orange church, accompanied by his family and the Visigoth nobles. On the threshold, he took the oak cross from the folds of his tunic, raised it heavenwards and addressed the crowd in these terms: "Rejoice all of you, brothers of this world, since the victory of Good over Evil is predestined from all eternity! Today, I, Pelayo, son of Fafila, of the race of Baltha and Alaric the Great, most illustrious kings of the Visigoths, proclaim the resurrection of our people in honour of the land of Hispania, and I command that this church be called the Church of the Holy Cross, in memory of this wooden cross that was given me by the Blessed Virgin on the field where the battle for our salvation was decided! And may God bless you all!"

There was an explosion of shouts and applause. Gaudiosa, standing at his side beneath the columns of the porch, could not resist the temptation to embrace him and kiss him on the cheeks. Petro and Gunderic fell to their knees, as did Toribio and Agasinda. Fafila and Froliuba moved to his side. Paciano swung his censer. The monks were jubilant.

"Praise be to the King of Hispania!", shouted Petro of Amaya, rising to his feet and signalling to the crowd. "Praise be to the King!", returned the bystanders. It was accomplished. Time moved forward again. Up there in heaven, someone was observing these events with great joy, and Toribio raised his eyes and thanked him.

At dawn next day, a great crowd thronged the colonnades of the temple on Pico Dobra. All the chieftains of the Cantabrian tribes had gathered, with their families and followers. Virone wore fine silver armour over a yellow coat whose edges were embroidered with gold thread and adorned with amber. By his side was Tridio, chief of the Salaeni, wrapped in a long amaranthine cloak, sufficiently open to reveal his powerful chest and a silver collar encrusted with pearls. His head was crowned with hollyhock and hibiscus flowers, his wrists and ankles ringed with gold.

Also with them was Talanio, clothed in a bearskin over a long light-blue tunic which came down to the top of his boots. He had brought his whole family and at least five hundred valley folk, all wearing the same light-blue garments. Alia had preferred to retain his green archer's uniform and black hood. His people, too, wore the colours of the forests in which they were

most at home. Origeno, on the other hand, was clothed in a fine white robe, decorated with leather ribbons studded with agates, rubies and rock crystal. Only the elders of his tribe wore their customary ochre smocks and bore the banners of the ancient gods of the Deva.

Then there were the family and village heads of the tribes formerly led by Aluane, Doidero, Turenno and Atia. They processed slowly and sadly beside the white horses, caparisoned in shining armour and decked with precious stones, which drew the torn but carefully recomposed, oiled and perfumed bodies of their heroes. Before the snorting horses walked the tribes' priests and sages, clothed in wolf skins and black hoods and carrying long wooden staffs, reciting well-known Celtic songs and rhymes. Other priests, meanwhile, wearing long white hoods and wearing amber and malachite pendants on their chests, were already busy lighting the fires that would release the souls of their chieftains to the God Erudino. The remainder of the warriors killed in the recent battles had been left to rot where they lay, waiting for the horses of the God of War to come and fetch them.

But their leaders had been brought up here by their companions, and their bodies were now transferred, from shoulder to shoulder, to the tops of the funeral pyres, which were already beginning to smoke. And as the sacred flames licked around them, the tribal women began dancing ancient dances, stretching their legs out in front and behind and moving their heads from side to side with rhythmic, sinuous movements to the sound of enormous white drums, flutes, horns and wolf's head shaped iron trumpets.

When the sun was at its zenith over the god's altar, the priests called for silence and pointed to the distant, barely discernable ocean. As the crowd knelt and prayed quietly, the eldest released four white doves, which immediately flew off seawards. When the birds had disappeared into the distance, the trumpets sounded and the dancing began again. A line of maidens approached the now extinguished pyres and gathered the ashes of the four chieftains into small coloured-glass urns. They handed them to four aged priests with hoary locks, close on a hundred years old, who approached the crest of the mountain, shook the urns, recited some verses and let the ashes be carried away on the wind.

And the wind of that victory soon spread throughout the known world. News of the battle fought in the Cyclamen Valley, soon renamed the Battle of Covadonga, was brought to the Roman Pontiff by Bishop Astolfo, who had fled to Pamplona with some of the people from Amaya and had been informed by messengers from Momo of events in the Asturias.

Pope Constantine the Syrian received the Bishop warmly and listened carefully to what had happened from the mouth of the younger man, whose face glowed with enthusiasm as he gave his account. As Astolfo described the apparitions and miracles of which he had heard tell, the Pope was wide-eyed and pale with emotion. Finally, still trembling with excitement, he got up, kissed Astolfo on the forehead, thanked him for his news and almost ran to the door giving onto the square in front of the basilica of Sanctus Petrus, where some catechumens were waiting to be baptised. There, Constantine blessed everyone and announced the miracle. The crowd rejoiced. The news spread like wildfire to patrician palace and public tavern alike. All the bells of Rome rang out, and that very evening the Pope held a mass on the Campus Martius.

Other messengers were sent to the courts of the great and powerful.

Plectudre, widow of Steward Pipin of Heristal, was still in mourning for her husband, who for twenty-seven years had governed the districts of Neustria and Austrasia. She was conversing with her nephew Teodald in the arcades of the cloister in front of the royal palace, when she was approached by a young page bearing a parchment. The tall woman with straight blond shoulder-length hair, who was wearing a long red-silk tunic with a broad sash that crossed at the back and was knotted at the front, read the epistle and burst into tears.

"Teodald! This is a sign from God! In Hispania, they have beaten the Saracens!", she said, turning her large blue eyes on the boy, who seemed not to understand. "Your Uncle Pipin would have been beside himself with joy. Quick! Take this letter to King Dagobert! Our Visigoth cousins have won a great victory . . . a sign of God's favour!".

Thus the news was announced at the court of the last of the Merovingians and soon reached the valleys of the Seine and Mosel and travelled on down the Rhine and Danube.

A few miles from Pavia, King Liutprand was praying in a recently erected basilica before the relics of St. Augustine, when a muscular young

monk plucked at his magnificent white robe adorned with emeralds, sapphires and lapis lazuli.

"Read this, my lord of Italy . . . Read what has happened in Hispania!". The Lombard king read the epistle and fell to his knees again before the relics.

"I thank you, my God, that you have halted the terrible scourge that was raging at our gates! Bless that distant land and protect our Holy Church from all future dangers!"

The monk prayed with him. Then the king left the church, climbed into his litter and ordered the bearers to take him to the Cortona Palace, where he was due to meet the papal legate. In Rome, they must know already; this would be an opportunity to learn more.

Now Plectudre's troubles and the irresolution of the Exarch of Ravenna seemed less important. Christendom had seen a comet arise out of Hispania: the Saracens had been stopped for the first time in their series of invasions. Soon the news would reach Byzantium. Maybe it would also be wise to send a message to the Exarch of Ravenna. This was a sign from St. Augustine. Was it possible that the time had come for peace and reconciliation among Christians?

A few weeks later, the news also reached Anastasio, Basileos of Constantinople. It was brought to him by a count from Africa, a smooth-shaven man with a troubled look and small, bronzed face. He was dressed in purple, with a long white cloak and a hexagonal skullcap encrusted with amethysts.

"Welcome back, Julian of Ceuta! I read concern and anxiety in your eyes. What news do you bring me from distant lands?", asked the Eastern Roman Emperor.

"Good news for our Empire, my glorious Basileos!", replied the Count, quickly changing his expression. "The Visigoth Christians have won a victory in the Asturias! The Emir of Hispania and the Governor of Tangiers, who was a good friend of mine, have been beaten in those mountains!"

The Emperor looked at him in surprise, then relaxed and smiled.

"Good news at last! Just at the moment when we are being besieged by those cursed heretics! I hope our people will now take courage and the subversion among the Themian troops will die down", said the elderly

aristocrat with the grey beard and brown eyes, who sat enthroned, wearing an ermine cloak and splendid diamond crown.

"I hope so, too, and that is why I came to bring you the news in person!", replied the man in purple.

"You have my thanks, Julian of Ceuta! But tell me . . . what will become of your friend Tariq?", asked the Emperor, not without a touch of malice, the laughter of his courtiers rising and fading away in the high domes of the great marble-columned reception hall.

"I don't know what they will say about him in Damascus, but his name will go down in history . . .", he broke off. "Personally, I can no longer call him a friend, now the situation has clarified again. We must choose either one side or the other", added the Count.

"That's good, Julian of Ceuta . . . At last, wisdom has prevailed", broke in Anastasio.

Then he called his palace officials, told them to provide the messenger a good room, get him some new clothes and then . . . have him arrested. Julian showed no reaction.

The Basileos looked again at the man whose features were so similar to his own, only more tanned.

"How long is it since you prayed to Christ, Julian of Ceuta?", he asked him seriously.

The count blushed and found his eyes focusing on the enormous icon hanging on the end wall of the palace. From up there, a man with large, hieratic eyes and a golden halo was watching him. In his hand, he held a cross and on either side of him were inscribed the letters alpha and omega.

Julian fell to his knees and began to pray. Only then did he realised that he had made a shipwreck of his life.

Meanwhile, seven hundred miles farther south, the wind of the defeat in the Asturias reached the royal palace of Caliph Walid, as he sat among splendid silk cushions, in the shade of two lofty palm trees, sucking the remains of a cake made with dates from the tips of his fingers. The venerable old man with the olive complexion handed the plate to his attendants and turned his attention to the epistle brought by the messengers he had sent to Cordoba. As he came to the end, his thin eyebrows went up a little, then , strangely, he seemed to relax:

"Oh dear, I'm sorry for brother Musa and his son . . .", he said. "We must respect them for the glory they have brought to Allah in recent years! But now send them orders to halt this campaign. Allah is great, but also ineffable. If this is his will, it means we have gone too far, and Allah does not approve of arrogance!"

Then he turned to the younger man beside him, who was very similar to him in features.

"Brother Sulayman, you take care of this. I am too old for these things and it is time I asked Allah to give me more leisure in the few years left to me."

So saying, he rose, took a stick from a servant and began to walk along the palm-fringed avenue beside a pool of still, deep water. His brother watched him walk away and remained deep in thought. For a moment, he wondered if this might be the prelude to the end of their dynasty. But almost immediately he shrugged off his gloomy thoughts and called another servant.

"Bring me that new girl with the green eyes who arrived yesterday from Sicily. I'll take her to my bed tonight!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

VALERIO

Valerio woke up fresh as a daisy that late-August morning. It was still dark, and cold. Summer had lost its power the week before, and already the pungent scent of decaying leaves and rain-drenched bark was in the air.

The elderly thirty-five-year-old got out of his bed on the mezzanine of the presbytery, removed his linen nightshirt, washed in a large wooden tub, and dried himself with the soft cloths they had left for him on the bench nearby. He put on a clean shirt and girded himself with a leather belt, before pulling on his long white surplice. His next stop was a terracotta pot hanging from the ceiling beside an iron tripod. Having broken off a couple of leaves from the thriving sage plant growing there, he dipped them in the cold water of the basin supported by the tripod and rubbed his teeth vigorously. Then he took a comb and a pair of scissors from a black wooden case on a nearby shelf, combed his fringe with the aid of a small mirror, and finally trimmed his finger and toe nails.

Having performed his ablutions, he opened the trunk at the foot of his bed, in which were folded a yellow amice and a red stole adorned with crosses worked in precious stones. He donned these vestments, then picked up a white fanon and an aspergillum from the stool under the room's main three-arched window. Only then did he notice the hundreds of torches moving through the woods outside. Above the crests of the mountains to the east, dawn was just beginning to colour the sky.

The lights, combined with the scent of the herbs being burned in the square in front of the church, reminded him of the first wedding he had ever celebrated: in a chapel at the gates of Toledo, under the watchful eye of his mentor Fruttuoso. That wedding, too, had been well-attended, by the members of two wealthy patrician families. It suddenly occurred to him that those days would never return. He felt a pang of sadness as he remembered the advice and encouragement he had always received from the future Bishop of Amaya. But Fruttuoso, too, had passed on.

It was as if a period of earlier simplicity, with all its joys and sorrows, had come to an end. Now the Church had to face more difficult challenges, which left little leisure for erudite discussions of the nature of Christ or how many angels might dance on the head of a pin, demanding instead the consolidation of the Church's temporal authority by means fair or foul. He shuddered at the thought of the menace approaching from the East: dangers and devilry in comparison with which the problems that had troubled Gregory the Great a hundred years earlier were small beer indeed.

And such powerful and numerous enemies would certainly not be overcome with the weapons of theological disquisition. It was time for the angels of light to learn a lesson from the agents of darkness, time to defend the seed of Truth with the Archangel's sword. But who was equal to the task? No Christian could take upon himself the role of an Archangel. So who would the Eternal Father send to defend his Church from such terrible threats? What they needed was an Emperor combining the qualities of daring, speed, vision, wisdom and piety—a very tall order. But at least, they had played their part. Pelayo's victory was a good beginning, maybe the spark required to stir the hearts and minds of other rulers and encourage them to unite?

The buzz of conversation rising from the courtyard reminded him of the joys in store that day. Valerio shrugged off his worries, grasped the thick parchment notebook and small box he kept in a niche near the door, and went out of the room. As he descended the stone stairs, the buzz increased. In the vestibule of the presbytery, he found twelve altar boys waiting for him, dressed in short white linen surplices and red silk capes. They were barefoot, crowned with flowers, each bearing an aspergillum and a long candle. Felipo was the first in line. There was total silence as Valerio entered the room. The Byzantine felt a surge of fatherly affection for these children with the Celtic features and gathered blond hair. He ordered Felipo to lead the procession. The lad pushed open the leaves of the heavy door and a dazzling light flooded in. The choir broke into song. The celebration had begun.

As the first Alleluia was sung, the red ball of the sun came level with the three-arched window at the east end of the church and rose behind the imposing white marble altar. Streams of rich red light flooded the high lateral walls of the building, breaking over the barley-sugar columns

and rounded arches of the Byzantine-style structure. Gradually, the light bathed the shields and medallions featuring cockerels, horses and lions, reached the friezes of the buttresses and struts of the colonnades, and was reflected, soft and delicate, into the niches containing figures of warring knights and praying clergy: stone-carved exemplars of the active and the contemplative orders, to one of which all of those present in the sacred building belonged.

Kneeling in the row nearest to the altar were Pelayo, Gaudiosa, Ermesinda and Isilde, clothed in loose white robes that came down to their ankles in sinuous folds and red felt slippers. Pelayo wore a diamond diadem, with fringes which spilled over his cheeks and neck, while his cobalt-blue eyes absorbed the warm glow of the rising sun. The faces of Gaudiosa and Isilde were framed by linen hoods spangled with agates and masked by transparent veils that came down to their waists. Both had their eyes fixed on the great wooden cross over the altar. Ermesilda's face was uncovered, but her blond tresses were gathered upon her neck in a net of gold. Her inquisitive eyes ran over the embroidered sections of the altar covering and tried to decipher the Latin inscriptions at its base.

On the right-hand side were Duke Petro, also robed in white, his pale, wrinkled face distinguished by bulging green eyes and grey whiskers; his wife Teodosinda, dressed in a bright red *colobium*, hair held by a silver circlet, gentle of expression and melancholy of bearing; and General Gunderic, wearing a long amaranthine tunic embroidered with stars and white flowers, his face radiant with joy. In his arms, he held the baby Alfonso, calm and composed on a voluminous purple cushion with gold edging.

On the left-hand side, in an attitude of prayer, was grandmother Amagoya, garlanded with roses and daisies, which graced the folds of a sumptuous orange tunic, held in at the waist by a belt of amber. In her hair, barely touched with white, she wore a pin in the shape of a honey bee, silver to match the tears welling up in her handsome Mediterranean eyes. Beside her sat her uncle Momo, clothed in a white tunic and short green stole, attached on his left shoulder by a horse-shaped clasp of rock crystal. His hoary face and thick white beard rested among the folds of a red shawl wrapping his powerful shoulders. He, too, was praying with bowed head. His son Eneko wore a green jacket under a leather waistcoat

richly adorned with gilded medallions and plaques of onyx and alabaster, his expression serious and reflective.

In the second row were many Visigoth officers, clothed in purple and white and wearing laurel wreaths. Among them were also the Asturian military leaders, Xilo, Naelio, Milio and Fruela, clad in long grey tunics under robes of light-blue material decorated with cornelian. All wore a long white band on their foreheads, fixed at the front by a cameo featuring a ruby cross. Fruela and Xilo sat side by side, delighted to be attending a ceremony the like of which they could never have imagined.

In the third row sat the Cantabrian chieftains, also swathed in generously cut white robes and adorned with garlands of flowers and wreaths of laurel. Alongside them, the elders from Valle wore sleeveless leather jackets over short orange tunics and broad-brimmed felt *petasi* sporting long eagle's feathers. All of them were there, even Taeda and Caelia, equipped with knotty oak walking sticks, who kept up a running commentary. Their number also included Decio, Anna, Attilio and Irunia, dressed in red tunics, silver grey capes and garlands of roses.

In the fourth row were the Swabian counts Ricimir, Filimir and Gildimir, hair neatly bobbed and moustaches trimmed, in long tawny-and-gold cloaks clasped on the chest by large white-opal crosses. Near them sat Count Sancho and his nephew Aurelio, their white robes set off by short black cloaks held in place by trident-shaped buckles.

Farther away, between the columns of a blind arch, knelt an aged woman with a wrinkled face. She wore a magnificent white *colobium*, held at the waist by interwoven strings of diamonds and amethysts, and a light silvery silk veil with purple edging. A necklace of pearls culminating in a topaz hung from her shining diadem, caressing her sunken cheeks and coming delicately to rest on her bosom. It was, of course, Queen Liuvigoto, who had wanted to attend the ceremony at all costs, with the few nuns who had survived the slaughter at the Abbey of Santa Maria de Monsacri.

She was weeping with joy, as if she had been waiting for years for this moment. She could at last die in peace. The Evil One who had deceived her so many years before had been defeated and her sins were forgiven. This celebration was her resurrection. Ardogunda, the abbey cook, held the edges of her veil, as she too knelt on the stone floor with the other nuns who had been miraculously spared, thanks to the trip into the country they had made that day with Toribio and Agasinda.

On the chairs on either side of the altar sat Abbot Paciano and the most senior monks from San Martín. In the middle, robed in an old-style white cassock, was Bishop Astolfo, recently returned from Rome.

When the sun had fully risen over the altar, the choir of boys and girls standing on raised platforms in the lateral apses intoned the Gloria and everyone stood up. Outside, a festive crowd began repeating the notes of the Catholic chant. Seven trumpets sounded and, from the vestibule opposite the one from which Valerio and the altar boys had entered, filed in two lines of twelve maidens, also dressed in short white surplices and red capes, beating time on small goatskin drums. Finally, to loud applause, came the two couples on whom all attention was focused.

Fafila was wearing a long brown satin outfit, held at the waist by a belt of gold resplendent with ruby eagles. His jet black hair was loose on his shoulders, his neck adorned with a necklace of heliotrope crosses. Froliuba was all in white, from neck to ankles, with a large crystal cross hanging on her bosom. She also wore her red hair loose, held by a sky-blue band embroidered with flowers and Celtic crosses.

Toribio and Agasinda were both robed in white, with long orange capes spangled with hundreds of rubies, sapphires and emeralds. The Count of Valle wore the familiar silver circlet on his brow, but now there was an addition to his adornment: his father's malachite pendant. His young bride with the lynx-like eyes was resplendent in garlands of red, white and yellow cistus, and rings of forget-me-knot at wrists and ankles. She wore the agate on her brow, as part of a splendid crown of violets and cyclamen.

All four were barefoot and the brides were without veils, one of the few concessions Valerio had made to the rough-and-ready Arian rite, apart from the custom of celebrating the wedding at sunrise.

When the twelve maidens arrived in front of the altar, they stopped drumming, genuflected before the cross, then processed slowly to array themselves behind the altar, forming a wide semicircle with the twelve altar boys, who had been waiting for them in silence. The two couples, meanwhile, came and stood in front of Valerio and knelt down to hear his homily. At the same time, a young monk ran to open a row of cages hanging from the balustrade of the open arches of the church. Dozens of doves took to the air, swooping and darting through the vaulting before gathering above the great cross on the altar and flying out into the wide

blue yonder. The church was flooded with the fragrance of myrtle, incense and myrrh, and the congregation broke into a hymn of praise.

When the singing was over, Valerio approached the altar, knelt before the cross, rose again, climbed into the ivory pulpit, opened his parchment notebook at the page he had marked, looked up and began his sermon.

"*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man sowed in his field*", began the now famous priest from Byzantium with a smile.

Total silence had fallen and, even though the entire assembly was a-quiver with joy and enthusiasm, no one dared so much as breathe, lest they distract attention from his holy words.

"*It is the smallest of all seeds but, when it is grown, it becomes the greatest of all trees, so that the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches.*", continued Valerio, quoting the words of Christ, letting his eyes fall softly on the congregation and addressing them as if he were speaking personally to each, like an old friend who knows you intimately.

"The Lord compared himself to a grain of mustard seed and, though he was the God of glory and eternal majesty, made himself nothing, condescending to be born of a virgin and take on the body of a baby child. He was sown in the earth, when his body was placed in the tomb. But, having gloriously risen from the dead, he grew on the earth until he became a tree, in whose branches the birds of the air come and live. This tree is the Church, which, through the death of Christ, has risen in glory. Its branches of course stand for the apostles, because, as branches are the natural ornament of a tree, so the apostles are the ornament of the Church of Christ, such is their beauty and grace. On these branches the birds make their nests. Allegorically, the birds are we ourselves who, coming to the Church of Christ, rest on the teaching of the apostles, like birds on the branches of a tree."

Valerio paused and, again, his eyes swept the congregation, particularly those in the front row. Pelayo was quite at ease with this preaching. It confirmed that he was on the right side, that of the tree, or that of the Church, and the allegory of the apostles fitted perfectly with the events he had witnessed a few days earlier. He also remembered the oak cross he had found in the Cyclamen Valley on the spot where Toribio's father had died, and he thought he had done well to bring it to Cangas and install it

in the little orange church in the presence of all. The Cross of Victory was certainly the small branch he intended to foster, and hand on to his son. Gaudiosa also took pleasure in the parable and at last felt the wind of hope revive her spirit, depressed and weary after so many years of exile and sacrifice.

At the beginning, Isilde was by no means convinced by Valerio's words. The Arian noblewoman had not been brought up to believe that Jesus was really the son of God, let alone God made man, as the doctrine of the Trinity would have it. For years, her parents and grandparents had taught her that Jesus was a man, the best possible of men, specially chosen of God, but not one with Him in spirit. Now something was beginning to gnaw at her mind. A God capable of coming down to human level, taking the burden of our sin and guilt, was more suggestive of a God who really loved his people, and there could be no greater love than that of a true parent. Are not our father and mother the only people by whom we expect always to be forgiven? She had never thought about it in this way. And now the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary seemed to fit in, too: that of a perfect mother, despite the absence of a fleshly bond, pure and simple in her love as no other woman could be.

Isilde began to tremble as her mind followed this course. She sensed that only the highest genius could have taken the decision to manifest his love and will in such a way. The sacredness of the family was therefore the cornerstone of the Catholic religion. She believed that herself now. But what sort of mother had she been? For years, she had concealed her terrible pain at the death of her husband; for years, she had distanced herself from the child with the red hair who now stood before her, tall, strong and spotless as an angel. The child never stopped talking about her father, was always asking questions about him. But she had refused to discuss him, had wanted to keep him all for herself. She had actually been jealous of her daughter!

Slowly large tears began to flow down her handsome cheeks and her head slumped among the folds of her hood. She asked God and the Blessed Virgin to forgive her. At that very moment, Froliuba turned and looked at her. Her daughter's face was radiant. She seemed to be telling her to stop worrying. Her long grief was over; this was also her resurrection. Isilde experienced an explosion of joy, as if a magical fire had sprung up in her heart and was melting the feelings that had remained frozen for years, sweeping away the dust and cobwebs. That fire in her heart was Him, she

knew it, the same Jesus who looked down on her from the cross on the altar. Isilde sighed and raised her head. She had taken the most important decision of her life: to become a Catholic.

Valerio continued his homily: "In the beginning, then, after our Lord's resurrection, the Church was small in numbers. But it grew to fill the whole earth, not just cities, but nations. The Persians believed, the Indians believed, the whole world believed. Not fear of the sword or the terror inspired by an earthly Emperor drew these peoples to Christ; it was simply faith in Him that brought them peace. Whereas before these nations had fought one another for worldly dominion, claiming territory or other riches, when they came to faith and confessed the name of Christ, they stopped fighting, recognising Jesus Christ as the one lord of all. So there were no more conflicts, as all honoured, adored and venerated Him. On his account, they set aside brutality and took pride only in his grace and their faith in him.

Although differences between the various kingdoms lead to discord regarding earthly rule, in the Kingdom of God they find unity, obeying a single Emperor as soldiers of Jesus Christ. And if necessity demands, they are more ready to die for their king than to lose their faith. And undoubtedly they are right, because this king for whom we fight rewards his soldiers even after death. The kings of this earth can give nothing when a soldier dies in support of their cause, because they themselves are subject to death. Christ the King, on the other hand, rewards the soldiers who have died for him with eternal life. A soldier of this world, if he falls in the service of his king, is merely a defeated man, while a soldier of Christ wins great glory if he be found worthy to die for his Lord."

The echo of his final words lingered among the capitals of the nave, caressing the fearless cockerels which faced one another in the circular medallions, the eagles hovering majestically above them and the lions that turned their shaggily maned heads towards their thrashing tails.

". . . If he be found worthy to die for Christ" . . . The phrase lodged deep in the hearts of those tough veterans, their faces marked with scars and bodies tested by countless battles, and indeed in the hearts of the women who had suffered so much to encourage them in times of despair. But now they all understood that their sacrifice had been recorded in heaven and

valued as an act of sublime love, second only to that of the One who had come to give His life for the sons of men.

Petro closed his eyes and saw the faces of his soldiers and lieutenants from Amaya, saluting him among hosts of angels on silvery clouds. Gunderic saw in his mind's eye the brothers Liuva and Teudiselo, red hair flying, clad in shining armour, blessing him alongside the hundreds of men who had followed them into the Asturias. Xilo and his muscular comrades wept at the thought of the friends they had lost on the bastions of Nava, Villa Flaviana and Villa Maior, while the Swabian counts remembered the companions who had fallen in the Cyclamen Valley. Even the pagan Cantabrian chieftains seemed to hear the voices of Doidero, Atia, Turenno and Aluane speaking softly from the recesses of the sacred building, encouraging them to convert without delay to the religion of Everlasting Light.

Grandmother Amagoya was reminded of the words of her son, who had announced his conversion just a few days before his death. She saw his face, young and boyish, so like that of Toribio, smiling at her as he had done before his mind was overwhelmed with the burdens of power and ambition. She saw him holding her hand as she put him to bed, after hearing one of the tales of Phaedrus he loved so much. As the old Vasconian lady broke down and cried, her uncle Momo and cousin Eneko put out their arms to support her.

"My son is alive, I'm sure! He is at peace with the true Father of us all!", she whispered, as her uncle held out a linen handkerchief and dried her eyes.

Even the tough Vasconians were moved, but Momo stroked her hair and urged her to keep her peace. Amagoya continued to weep silently, turning her attention to the young lad who was all that remained to her of her family.

Meanwhile, Valerio had finished his sermon and signalled to the two couples to approach. There was a long pause, filled only by the intense light that reverberated along the colonnades and the fragrance of myrtle, that reached the nostrils even of those at the back of the church.

Then the time-honoured questions were put:

"Fafila, son of Pelayo and Gaudiosa, do you take as your lawful wedded wife Froliuba, daughter of Teodomir and Isilde, to have and to hold till death do you part?"

"I do", replied the young man with the fawn-like face.

"And you, Froliuba, do you take as your husband Fafila, to have and to hold till death do you part?"

"I do!", almost shouted the young woman with the red hair. From behind them, applause broke out for the first time. Valerio pronounced the blessing joining them in marriage.

Then he turned to the other couple:

"And now it is your turn, my children", he continued, with a complicit smile for his young friend. Toribio was so happy he could barely hold back his tears.

"So, then, Toribio, son of Hernando and Goswinta, do you take as your lawful wedded wife Agasinda, daughter of Pelayo and Gaudiosa, to have and to hold until death do you part?", repeated his old friend, this time a little more quietly.

"I do", replied the Count of Valle brusquely. Valerio looked into his eyes and he, too, was overcome with emotion. There was a slight quaver in his voice:

"And you, Agasinda, do you take Toribio as your husband . . .".

His words were interrupted by a long burst of applause welcoming the return of the flock of white doves, that now invaded the church. One of them settled on Amagoya's shoulder, who almost fainted at so portentous a sign from heaven.

"I do! I do!", exclaimed the famous general's daughter, throwing herself into the arms of her husband. Valerio was hard pressed to conclude the formalities, as the congregation had already spontaneously erupted into the opening notes of the Hosanna. The choir immediately joined in and the church was filled with jubilant singing.

The priest then took a small box from his pocket, opened it and handed the contents to the two couples. The young people exchanged rings and, as the congregation continued singing and the doves again took wing, gave each other heartfelt kisses. One of the acolytes standing near the balustrade of the chancel arch then signalled to a group of young lads waiting below, and soon the sound of bells rang out from the tower of the church and spread through the surrounding mountains and valleys. Those who heard began singing and playing instruments of every kind, and there were celebrations, dances and banquets. The different peoples of these northern lands seemed to have become one: all Christians, all sons and daughters of the Church, all . . . Hispanic.

When the choir had finished singing the Hosanna and the newly married couples had returned to their families, Valerio spoke again.

"And now, brothers and sisters, I have to tell you that the rejoicing of this holy day is not yet over."

Many exchanged puzzled glances. Had not the weddings been solemnised? But the nobles in the front rows were well aware of Valerio's intention.

"Bring me brother Alfonso!", intoned the harmonious voice of the Byzantine monk, turning shining eyes on Duke Petro and *domna* Teodosinda.

The blond knight in the amaranthine tunic stood and approached the altar with military bearing, followed by the Duke and Duchess. From the right-hand apse of the church, a Hispano-Roman maiden, robed in white, her black curly hair crowned with a wreath of eucalyptus leaves, intoned the Credo, accompanied by lyre and pan pipes. As the melody unfolded, Valerio covered the blue-eyed child with the fanon still folded over his right elbow and invited the party to accompany him to the hexagonal baptistery, which stood on a broad dais to the left of the door by which the two couples had entered.

Here, in the sight of all, the priest climbed over the side of the wide stone basin and descended step by step into the centre of the pool, where the water came up to his waist. As the Credo came to an end, Valerio immersed Alfonso in the holy water, to cleanse him and welcome him into the new life of faith. The child cried a little, but the monk took care not to frighten him and, removing him from the water, wrapped him gently in the fanon. Alfonso calmed down and fixed his big eyes on those of the dark-complexioned priest. In response, Valerio almost instinctively raised the bundle he was holding towards the towering cross on the altar nearby.

The choir again broke into Alleluias and everyone began to applaud.

"Long live Alfonso! Long live Alfonso!", chanted the rows behind them, especially those where the older Cantabrians were seated. For them, this was their true princeling—the son of Petro, their Duke, who had come to visit them twice in Valle, and whose sister had married their excellent Judge.

The Duke of Amaya looked at his consort tenderly, and she finally broke into a broad, radiant smile, maybe the first for many years. Teodosinda at last felt a new spirit stir in her bosom, a spirit of hope she had not felt since she was a child, dreaming with her friends of one day becoming the mother

of a wonderful family. Things had not turned out that way, of course. But this son, her only child, was so bonny and of such sunny disposition, it was enough. She remembered the words spoken by her husband at Valle de Autrigonia, and she too felt a special destiny awaited this child with the silent little face and solemn expression.

Returning to the altar, Valerio handed Alfonso back to his godfather Gunderic, who stroked him with his big, heavily scarred hand, laid him on his cushion and, walking in front of his lord and lady, knelt down again beside Pelayo and the newlywed couples. Valerio went ahead with his preparations for the mass and, assisted by his altar boys, in due course invited the congregation to take the bread of the Eucharist.

To the surprise of all the Catholics present, the Arian Isilde also came forward, as did a number of Cantabrians know to be of pagan allegiance. Valerio hesitated to place the bread in their unsanctified mouths and turned to Bishop Astolfo for guidance. Abbot Paciano whispered a few words in the Bishop's ear, at which Astolfo smiled and nodded his assent. So Valerio gave his blessing to those truth-seeking souls and shared the bread with them, hoping he would soon see them in the baptistery where Alfonso had just shown the way.

At the end of the mass, the Byzantine cleric was about to give the final blessing when he was interrupted by Bishop Astolfo. He looked in surprise, and with a degree of fear, at the man in the old-style cassock, who was observing him with a stern expression, mouth almost hidden by his thick copper-coloured beard.

"Have I said or done anything wrong?", he wondered.

Ill at ease, the guests and worshippers in the congregation began to enquire among themselves. Momo and Eneko exchanged a few words, serious and attentive. The altar boys, too, looked around, confused and uncertain.

"Wait a minute, Valerio of Byzantium, I have an announcement to make regarding you!", thundered the vibrant, steely voice of the Vasconian Bishop.

Valerio felt a pang of fear and leaned against the altar, praying that God was not about to punish him for committing some unintended blasphemy. The rite had most certainly been celebrated in the Catholic manner. Had he perhaps allowed a few Arian aberrations to creep in? But surely nothing significant: minor variations in customs and clothing, nothing to

do with the rite itself. Or maybe he had done wrong to allow Isilde to take communion? Had he perhaps misinterpreted the Bishop's signals?

The tall, muscular fifty-year-old rose from his stool and walked with slow, resolute steps towards the monk, who seemed to shrink as he waited beneath the great cross on the altar.

When he reached him, the Bishop turned to the congregation, who appeared shocked by this unusual intervention.

"Hear me, brothers and sisters who have come to this splendid church on this wonderful day! There is yet one more cause for rejoicing!", he began.

At these words, everyone relaxed and Valerio felt a pleasurable sensation come over him. He knew the feeling: it was the excitement of anticipation when a deep-seated desire is about to be fulfilled.

The Bishop looked at Valerio and the serene, contented expression they all associated with him returned to his face. Astolfo extracted a letter from the folds of his garment.

"This letter comes straight from Rome, where two weeks ago I met the Pope, our most glorious and holy brother Constantine of Syria."

The gathered flock listened, impressed beyond measure.

"Well brothers, not only do I bring you the papal blessing and congratulations to Duke Pelayo, whom he unreservedly accepts as your king after the great victory of the Cavae Dominicae, as you all now refer to it in honour of the Blessed Virgin, whom many of you personally saw frustrate with outstretched hand the designs of the Evil One . . .", he declared, as those in the front row drew closer to Pelayo and Gaudiosa held his hand, "I also bring you the good news, people of Cantabria and the Asturias, that you now have a bishop of your very own . . ."

Here Astolfo paused and fixed his eyes on the white-clad monk beside him, who seemed about to collapse with excitement.

"Here he is, before your eyes, at the foot of this great cross, between the letters alpha and omega, like Jesus himself!"

Loud applause broke out, spreading from one section of the church to the next.

"So then, by the will of our Holy Pontiff, who speaks in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I bless the new Bishop of Hispania . . . Valerio of Byzantium!"

The congregation applauded again and began joyfully shouting the name of their Bishop, who has fallen on his knees at Astolfo's feet and

was inwardly praying that the Lord would help him to bear this additional cross.

As if he had known all along, now Paciano gestured to the choir and suddenly the strains of the Magnificat broke the awesome silence that had descended on them as they digested the import of Astolfo's announcement. So the Bishop of Amaya pronounced the final blessing, then urged Valerio to get up and mingle with his new flock, the sheep of his pasture.

There was no counting the hugs and kisses. Pelayo and Petro were the first to shake his hand and kneel before him. Gaudiosa and Isilde kissed his feet. The Asturian and Cantabrian chieftains took him, hoisted him onto their shoulders and carried him outside, onto the parvis, where the news had already spread among the crowd.

Having set him down at the top of the double flight of steps leading to the central doorway, the warriors stood aside so that he could finally have his say.

But Valerio was still too shocked by the sudden and unexpected good news, which maybe he felt he did not deserve. As he desperately sought the right words to weave into a suitable speech, he felt the warmth of a hand on his right shoulder. Without having to be told, he knew who it was. Turning his head, he recognised the cheerful, chubby face of the boy with the blond hair and blue eyes who for so many years had been his faithful companion. With the tears streaming down his cheeks, he found comfort in the embrace of his old friend Toribio.

EPILOGUE

Valle de Autrigonia, one evening in late October

Grandmother Amagoya approached the wide open hearth, picked up some of the ash logs piled beside it and threw them into the blaze, raising a shower of sparks. She placed a large copper frying pan on the glowing embers and gave the handle a few sharp shakes to make sure the chestnuts it contained were done on every side. Then she went back and sat at the head of the long oak table, watched by Toribio, Agasinda and Teodosinda, who were sitting along one side, and uncle Momo, at the far end. Ermesinda was rocking little Alfonso in a pretty little black pine cradle, in the middle of the fortress's large reception room.

It was here, only six months previously, that the future General Gunderic, had made his dramatic appearance as Duke Petro of Amaya's special envoy. Years seemed to have passed since that evening, when Judge Hernando had gathered the village elders to hear what was happening in the big wide world beyond their mountain valley. Hernando's rough voice and surly words still seemed to echo among the tall arches and massive beams of the ceiling, dried out and blackened by centuries of poorly vented smoke and heat.

The gruff old man who commanded the stronghold had passed on, but his mother and son were still there, and his absence was keenly felt by them all, for despite his lack of manners they had come to know him as a man with a heart of gold. In temper, he was not unlike many leaders who had grown up in the difficult and dangerous conditions of these remote valleys. His was the cantankerous nature common to the menfolk of the area. All the greater his merit, then, if a gentle heart was discernible beneath the rough appearance: for the women especially, this was the mark of a true man. Now, all they could do was take courage and get on with life, looking for heaven's blessing by day and by night.

The people of Valle had celebrated the customary rites and sacrifices for their former chief until the close of summer. The older folk had worn the yellow flowers of mourning for at least forty days, and many heads of families had visited grandmother Amagoya with baskets of bread, gifts of dried meat, jars of honey, wine, and even salt. The village of San Bartolomeo had sent wagonloads of firewood, enough to keep the fortress supplied for at least two winters. The women of San Petro had bought a splendid pearl necklace for Agasinda at the market of Flaviobriga, and the blacksmiths of San Rocco had forged a long golden sword for Toribio. The carpenters of Valle, meanwhile, under the critical eye of old Taeda, had crafted a majestic four-poster bed for the newlyweds' room, while Anna and her friends had sewn and embroidered the sheets and hangings.

Momo of Pamplona had decided to visit his relatives for a few days, bringing a casket of jewellery and precious stones as a present for the young couple and a crystal box containing combs, mirrors and jars of perfume for his niece Amagoya. The elderly patriarch, who had turned up alone and unannounced on his white steed, had been warmly welcomed by them all. Amagoya had always loved her uncle and had prayed for many years that reconciliation would come. Toribio had thrown open the doors of the fortress and persuaded the elders to organise a great banquet in his honour. To his surprise, no one refused. After the great events at the Cavae Dominicae, the word had clearly spread among the Autrigonian families that there was no longer any cause for resentment against their Vasconian neighbours. The time for forgiveness and celebration had come.

Gaudiosa had sent Ermesinda to spend some time with her sister, while her husband was renovating the villa at Cangas, which had been badly damaged by the Saracens some months before, and erecting strong walls around the village, now the centre of Christian resistance to the Islamic invasion. Duke Petro, meanwhile, was the guest of Count Sancho, and was due to come and collect his wife and baby Alfonso in November. After the wedding, Toribio had insisted that his aunt and Alfonso stay with them for a while, to allow the Duke to recruit and train a new army and, with God's help, enlist the support of the Frankish court, whose ambassadors—or so rumour had it—would soon be arriving at San Emeterio.

Amagoya sat down again and a long silence ensued. The table was covered with the remains of the banquet: dirty bowls, greasy dishes, plates of pork ribs stripped of their meat, the cold remains of oat pancakes. The huge cooking pot used for the *pulmentaria* had been taken away empty. The

bacon containers had been wiped clean, the spits used to turn chickens, kids and wild boars' thighs piled in disorder on the nearby braziers. Amagoya surveyed the scene with satisfaction: the banquet had been a success.

The elders had left the fortress at sunset to return home with their firstborn sons. They had taken their leave with reverence, wishing the new lord and lady great happiness and prosperity. And now only the close relatives remained, gathered round the hearth like any family of peasant farmers. Toribio looked tenderly into the love-filled eyes of his Visigoth bride. Sitting opposite, Teodosinda clearly envied them, as she silently sipped the ruby red liquid in her crystal goblet. The elderly patriarch, meanwhile, fixed his gaze on the fire, apparently absorbed in old memories.

Then Ermesinda suddenly piped up to break the enchantment:

"Uncle Momo", for thus she had come to call the old man with the long white beard, "tell us a story".

The grown-ups smiled and wondered how their aged relative would react. Taken by surprise, Momo hesitated for a moment.

"Yes, go on, uncle, tell us one of those Phaedrus stories, which you used to tell us around the fire when we were children ourselves!", urged Amagoya, her own heart beating faster in anticipation.

So the old man turned his eyes away from the brightly burning logs, wrinkled his brow and looked at the little girl with the Celtic features. "As you wish, little maiden with the blue eyes!", he said with a smile and, loosening his fine green coat, rested his crossed arms on the edge of the table and began his story:

"A hare that had been caught by an eagle was loudly lamenting its fate. A sparrow came and started to mock: 'What has become of your fleetness of foot? What's happening? Have you lost your legs?'. While the sparrow was taunting the hare, a falcon swooped down on it. How the sparrow cried and wept! And as the falcon tore it to pieces, the hare said with its dying breath: 'Ah! Your fate makes mine a little easier. A moment ago, you were laughing at my misfortune, so fearless and sure of yourself. Now we are united in suffering!'".

When he had finished, Momo looked at his listeners.

"So, young people, what is the moral of this story?"

There was a long silence. Toribio and Agasinda exchanged glances, Teodosinda continued to sip her wine. Amagoya smiled, but made no comment. So it was little Ermesinda who spoke up first: "The sparrow

should not have taken pleasure in taunting the hare. It was stupid and thoroughly deserved its fate."

Momo listened with amusement. "My child, that is the most obvious interpretation. But what is the deeper meaning?", he asked, stroking his beard and turning to look at the adults.

The young folk sitting near him looked at each other uneasily. Maybe they had understood the message behind Momo's story, but they did not want to risk looking silly in the stern eyes of a man renowned for his wisdom. So the patriarch looked tenderly towards Teodosinda. The noblewoman from Amaya returned his gaze with a gentle, reflective expression: "It means that, when faced with the dangers of this world, we are all in the same boat, and it is stupid to laugh at others' troubles, when we may well suffer the same fate!"

Momo of Pamplona said nothing but continued to stroke his beard and scrutinise the beautiful woman with the red veil. Then he nodded.

"Quite right, young Duchess of Amaya! And that is why I finally decided to help your husband and your peoples", said the old man, speaking more slowly and gazing again into the dancing flames.

Teodosinda was moved. The man before her was the leader of a people universally known for their uncooperativeness, a people which had given no end of trouble to the Visigoths in the past. But now, on this magical evening, it was really as if they had become one big family. And, almost despite herself, the lady let a quiet *thank you* escape her lips.

The poignancy of the scene was not lost on Toribio, who remembered the words his aunt had spoken on the terrace of the ducal palace on the evening when Amaya was besieged. He could therefore not resist making his own comment: "The sparrow might perhaps have helped the hare . . . instead of wasting time mocking it!"

Momo did not look at him, but continued gazing into the fire:

"Indeed, Toribio. You are thinking how a Christian would behave. But it was only a sparrow, not a lion!", he said, in little above a whisper, and after another pause concluded: "As a sparrow, it would have been honourable enough if it had kept its peace".

The others smiled, except Ermesinda, who could not understand the subtle irony of his remark.

Amagoya rose and went over to the hearth, where the panful of chestnuts was still roasting.

"They're ready. Be careful you don't get burnt!", she said, ladling the chestnuts into six terracotta bowls that stood ready on the floor.

Having served her uncle, she passed the piping hot bowls to the others and, last of all, after cooling them with a damp cloth, handed a few chestnuts to Ermesinda.

The child began removing the skins and greedily devouring the excellent early autumn fruits. Then, with her mouth still full, she turned to the patriarch again: "Please, uncle Momo, tell us another!"

"Leave your uncle in peace, sister! He has been gracious enough and it is past your bedtime. The bell for vespers rang long since, so off you go!", said Agasinda with a frown.

But Momo begged her to be patient and began again:

"Here's another one, then:

In the woods one day, the hares staged a noisy protest because they could no longer bear to live in continual fear. They rushed to a pond, determined to throw themselves in. Their arrival scared the frogs, who in abject fear took refuge beneath the slimy green water. At this, one of the hares exclaimed: 'Good gracious! There are others in this world who live in fear of those bigger than themselves. Others suffer, so let us be prepared to suffer, too!'"

Again, Momo turned to look at the others, and again no one risked passing comment.

So the old man turned to Ermesinda: "So what is the moral of this story, little chatterbox?", he asked.

The child sat gazing at the beams of the ceiling, then commented: "Everyone know that frogs panic if hares ten times bigger than themselves come along, so why are you telling us this story, uncle Momo?"

The old man laughed. "And can you give a better answer than this cheeky little creature?", he asked the others.

"You are right, uncle. Ermesinda is too young to understand the moral of the tale. Let those who cannot bear the burden of their woes look at those of others and so learn to cope! Isn't that the meaning?", replied her sister at last.

"Well done, Agasinda. You are truly a wise girl, as many people have told me", declared the old man.

"Shall I tell you one more before you go to bed?", he asked.

"Yes! Yes!", cried Ermesinda, attracting a black look from her sister.

The patriarch sipped a little wine from his goblet to wet his whistle and was about to start a third fable, when Decio suddenly appeared on the threshold wearing his usual inscrutable expression.

"What is it, Decio, at this late hour?", asked Amagoya.

"I am sorry to disturb you, my lords and ladies, but we have a visit", he replied with a trace of embarrassment.

"A visit at this time of day? Who can have taken the trouble to come out all this way?", asked Toribio, puzzled.

Decio disappeared and soon they heard footsteps approaching in the corridor. Toribio remembered the footsteps that had preceded the arrival of Gunderic six months earlier. But this time there was no rhythmic clash of metal, just the sound of a pair of comfortable Byzantine walking boots. And there on the threshold, as if by magic, in a fine white habit and black cloak with the hood still up, was Valerio.

Everyone rose, their expressions a mixture of joy and surprise. Ermesinda ran to embrace the monk, who lifted her up and kissed her on the forehead.

"My little one! How you've grown since I saw you a few weeks ago!", exclaimed the new Bishop.

"Welcome, Valerio! Come and sit down. There are still some chestnuts left", urged Toribio, delighted to see his friend.

"I had something to eat on the way, dear friends", replied Valerio, shaking hands and embracing everyone in turn. When he came to patriarch Momo, he said: "How good to find you here, *domne* Momo, especially since I have just come from San Emeterio and am on my way to Pamplona to visit Bishop Astolfo. I could not resist the temptation to stop at Valle. I wanted to see my old friend Toribio and, lo and behold, I find you here with the whole family!"

The patriarch laughed whole-heartedly and invited Valerio to sit beside him and tell him the news from San Emeterio. But Teodosinda interrupted at this point, wanting first to have news of her husband.

"He is in the best of health, I can assure you, *domna* Teodosinda. And I can also tell you that the Frankish ambassadors have arrived!"

"The ones who were expected for the new moon?", asked Momo, his curiosity aroused.

"They came early! They were met at the harbour by Duke Petro and Count Sancho in person. You should have seen what fine ships they came in, not to mention their magnificent clothing and sparkling crowns . . .",

went on Valerio. "They also wanted to be introduced to me . . . and called me bishop . . . I don't know how they already knew! And, glory be, what fine soldiers they had with them . . . blond-haired fellows tall as trees carrying enormous pikes as if they were mere ox-goads, and heavy shields as if they were made of papyrus", he continued, gesturing expansively to convey such marvels.

"And their leader, Charles Martel . . . or so he introduced himself! "The Hammer", indeed! What a strapping fellow! I've never seen a more handsome young noblemen!"

"You said . . . Martel?", interrupted Momo.

"Just so! He had the features of Apollo, the face of one of the cherubim, eyes as blue as the Aegean, hair like the gold of Sarmazia! And what a voice! He spoke with the gravity of a man of fifty, though I swear he is no more than five and twenty!"

They were all agog, wishing they had been present to see this ambassador of the redoubtable Frankish nation.

"He is the youngest son of Pipin of Heristal", broke in Momo. "I knew him when he was still a child, when I met his father in Narbonne, after the last war in Septimania. I remember now . . . the boy is a bastard, no one knows much about his mother . . . !"

"That's something I had no way of knowing", said Valerio. "But if there is a foreign general able to help our king defend us from the Saracens, he is the man, I am sure of it!"

"And what was his response, then?", asked Toribio, anxious to know the outcome of the meeting.

"That they will help us! Thank God! It is obvious we are all in the same boat, isn't it?", replied the new Bishop.

Toribio smiled at Momo. There could be no better epilogue to the fable the old Vasconian patriarch had just told them. Momo read his thoughts. "Well, my young friends," he said, "I am truly pleased that light is breaking in to dispel all the shadows that had fallen on our peoples. Let's rejoice at this God-given sign and raise our glasses in his honour", he proposed, more hopeful than he had felt for many a long year. The others followed his example and Valerio concluded:

"I'll tell you the rest at breakfast tomorrow. I imagine you are ready for bed . . . I could certainly do with some sleep, myself."

Amagoya signalled to Decio, who stood quietly waiting by the fireplace. The butler withdrew and soon reappeared with Anna. The young woman

knelt in front of the Bishop, who touched her head in blessing, then hurried Ermesinda off to bed while her husband was moving Alfonso's cradle into Teodosinda's room. When Teodosinda, Amagoya and her uncle had bid everyone good night and withdrawn to their rooms, Agasinda instructed Lario and Lucio in their duties for the following day.

While she was performing the offices of a good chatelaine, Valerio took the opportunity to whisper his secret to Toribio..

"I haven't stopped by just to say hello, Toribio!", he said. "Tomorrow we have a task to complete, if you remember?"

Toribio was nonplussed, but Valerio gave him no time to ask questions.

"Get off to bed now. You'll think of it later. Anyway, it's not right to leave such a beautiful girl all on her own. It would be a real pity, now you are married!"

Toribio racked his brains. He was about to insist and ask Valerio what task he was referring to, when he felt the warmth of his wife's hand on his own.

"Come on, let's go to bed!", said the girl with the lynx-like eyes.

So Valerio went off with Decio, who had returned to escort him to his chamber, and the young couple made their way, hand in hand, to their magnificent nuptial chamber.

That night, Toribio dreamed of a vast Christian army doing battle with another enormous host among the rolling green hills of a landscape unknown to him. The Christians were led by a man on a white charger, clad in scale armour. His helmet sported a pair of iron wings and a long plume, red to match the cloak flying out behind him. Before him, a Saracen general, bearded and dark-complexioned, was about to bring down his scimitar on a woman protecting her child with her naked body. The knight in the red cloak deflected the scimitar with his mighty axe, then struck off the Saracen's head with a single blow.

Then the woman and child disappeared and were replaced by a young man with a serious expression standing at a lectern and studying the passages pointed out to him by his tutor, a monk. The young man looked out of a window onto the surrounding countryside: wherever he looked, there were castles and fortresses under construction, and groups of officials reading out the laws of a new empire to awed but excited crowds. These officials spoke all the languages and dialects of Europe and were followed

by armies of soldiers, all wearing the same uniform. Then Toribio saw the same man in middle age, sitting on a throne surrounded by nobles in fine ermine-trimmed robes. And finally, amid joyful singing, he was crowned by the Pope in person during the Christmas mass. And every one shouted:

"Carolus, Carolus Magnus! Deus benedicat Imperatorem nostrum!"

Then the scene shifted again and Toribio saw tall, red-haired warriors standing in the bows of dragon-prowed ships cutting through deep dark waters amid mountains of ice. Among them was a man in white, fat and piggy faced, staring at the horizon. Toribio immediately recognised Oppa and began to tremble. But the demon seemed totally uninterested in him. His attention was on the heavenly bodies by which his warriors steered their ships. And in the heavens appeared a flash of green. It came from a cross set with an emerald, shining among eleven similar constellations.

Toribio was about to reach out for it, when his hand was restrained by a fair-skinned woman, her blond hair held by a silver circlet. He recognised his mother, and the man in the red coat beside her. "Mum, Dad!", he cried in wonder. "Mum, Dad!". Then the man in the red coat, who was now young and handsome, took his hand and said gently: "Don't worry, my son. Your mission is accomplished. Now let your children's children do their part!". Then both his parents kissed his forehead and vanished. "Mum, Dad!", he continued to repeat, feeling the caress of a warm hand on his tear-stained cheeks. When he opened his eyes, he saw Agasinda leaning over him. She continued to caress him and kiss his lips. His moans had awakened her and she realised he was dreaming. Now he was aroused, she lowered herself onto him and they made love with a joy they had never experienced before.

In the early dawn, the Count of Valle was awakened by Decio, his faithful retainer.

"Master, it is time to get up and get ready. The Bishop is waiting for you in the hall."

Toribio emerged from the covers, hastily pulled on his white woollen breaches and green jerkin, adjusted the straps of his waistcoat with the golden-lion medallion and attached the red sash round his waist. Then he put on his sliver headband, kissed the still-sleeping Agasinda and rushed down the stairs.

The Byzantine monk was awaiting him, clothed in his everyday brown habit.

"Let's go, my friend. We have a job to do. You did understand yesterday evening, didn't you?", asked the man with the gentle amber-coloured eyes and handsome forehead under his fringe of chestnut brown hair.

"Of course . . . or rather . . . I think so! You want us to go back to the Pico Blanco, then?"

"Exactly! Remember the chapel you wanted to found? Well, now is the time to finish the work. Come on, have some bread and honey, and the milk Anna has brought you."

Toribio saw that the young servant girl had come in with a tray of hot rolls and a jug of milk—just as she had six months earlier.

"Anna, most faithful maidservant! This reminds me of the morning when my father and I went off to war. Alas, now I am all alone . . .", said the young count sadly.

"Alone you will never be, lord Toribio. You can always count on your people and on me. We have always loved you, ever since you were a baby. And your father and mother are looking down from heaven. Have no fear!", she replied.

Toribio stroked her cheek. "You have always been so kind to me, Anna. I owe you a debt of gratitude. I shall give orders for you and Decio to be granted the plot of land in front of the new wood. There you will be able to build a house and bring up your family."

Valerio seemed to approve of this act of generosity. Anna laid the tray and jug on the ground, threw herself down and kissed the toes of Toribio's boots.

"Thank you, my lord! And you will always be a welcome guest at our humble table!".

Toribio helped her up and she again offered him his breakfast.

"If our Church wins the race, I tell you that one day there will no longer be servants and masters, dear Anna, but only love and respect for all the creatures of this world!", added the young man, as he chewed the soft, honey-spread roll.

Anna seemed not to understand his words, but Valerio certainly did.

"Toribio, sometimes you surprise me. If you think you have talent for such pronouncements, just let me know! I shall definitely need help with my next sermon", he said, joking over a prophecy almost inconceivable in those distant days. Toribio and Anna laughed.

"Well, let's go. The cock is crowing", concluded his old friend, but not before whispering: "But what a wonderful world it would be, don't you think?"

The pair galloped off on Asfredo and Witisclo, flying through the surrounding valleys and gorges with an unusual lightness of spirit. The colours of autumn were exploding all around them: yellow, orange, red, brown, green, purple. The fronds of pine and larch sprung back to sting their faces, but neither seemed to notice. Upon them both was the desire to return to the mountain top, to the summit where their story had begun all those months ago. Having reached the familiar cliff, they rode to the edge to admire the view. The great green serpent of the River Ebro still wound its way through the woodland below. Still before them were the pink-hued peaks of the Cantabrian massif and, farther away, the blue outlines of the mountains of The Asturias.

They turned and spurred their horses towards the clearing in the larch wood. A pair of falcons took to the air, frightened by the noise of their approach. But then they caught their breath in amazement: up there, on the flat area where, a few months earlier, they had left nothing but a vague outline, stood a shining white chapel, built in the shape of a cross, with a loggia and two bells on the roof.

They could not believe their eyes. This was the final miracle of the whole miraculous story. Suddenly the bells rang and above the loggia appeared a leather helmet with a crest of crow's feathers and a silver headband. Toribio and Valerio exchanged glances. Then they heard the roar of a lion.

Instinctively they looked upwards. But no lion was to be seen. There, instead, greeting them with broad smiles, were Father Hernando and Mother Goswinta, surrounded by twelve angels, including . . . St. Jacobus with his long white beard.

THE END

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY OF VISIGOTH RULERS

Alaric the Great, 395-410: first king of the Visigoths. He was a direct descendant of Baltha, the legendary founder of the race, in whose day the Goths had lived on the island of Gøtland (today part of Sweden). Alaric unified the Visigoth tribes when still only twenty-four years old. He won a victory over the Romans at Andrianople on 9 August 378, causing the Christian writer Ambrosius to comment: "The sun is setting on the world". Alaric became king of all the Visigoths in 395, shortly after the death of Emperor Theodosius and the division of the Empire into East and West. In 400, Alaric marched on Italy and, on 24 August 410, was responsible for the infamous Sack of Rome. He died at Cosenza later that year, attempting to reach Africa.

Athaulf, 410-415: married Galla Placidia, daughter of the Emperor Theodosius and sister of Honorius, Western Roman Emperor after the death of his father in 395. Their love was so passionate and, at the same time, so crossed by political interests as to constitute one of the greatest and most romantic love stories of all time. An outstanding warrior, on many occasions Athaulf came to the aid of the Romans, serving Honorius and his brilliant general Constantius (his rival for Galla's affections). This enabled the Visigoths to establish themselves first in Narbonne (where he married Galla in 414), then in Spain, after defeating the Vandals, Swabians and Alans, who had settled there in 409.

In August 415, he was stabbed to death by his slave Dubius, whom he had often made fun of on account of his short stature. However, it was also whispered that the crime was commissioned by a certain Eberwulf, rumoured to be Galla's lover. Without doubt, nobles hostile to the Balthi dynasty also had a hand in the affair.

Sigeric, 415: king proclaimed by the faction hostile to the Balthingians. A coarse, blood-thirsty man, he had Galla Placidia arrested and humiliated

her by forcing her to walk 15 miles in chains. But the nobles faithful to the dynasty rebelled and had him assassinated. Galla was liberated by Wallia, future king of the true Balthi line.

Wallia, 415-418: after returning Galla to General Constantius, he signed a pact with the Romans giving the Visigoths *foederati* status. He went on to defeat the Vandals, Swabians and Alans, pushing them into the western and southern fringes of the Iberian Peninsula. The Visigoth kingdom expanded into Aquitaine, with Toulouse as its capital.

Theodoric I, 418-451 : a long-lived, intelligent king, he was a faithful ally of Rome.

With the Franks, Alans and Burgundians, he assisted the Roman General Aetius in defeating the immense army of Attila the Hun (said to have numbered 500,000 men, including Ostrogoths, Scythians, Sarmatians, Erulians and Gepids) on the Catalaunian Fields (now Troyes, France) in 451, himself perishing in the battle.

Thorismond 451-453: fought bravely on the Catalaunian Fields and was crowned on the battlefield before his father Theodoric's dead body. Having fallen into disgrace in Rome because of his secessionist intentions, he was strangled by his brothers Theodoric and Frederic in a plot hatched by the Roman general Aetius.

Theodoric II, 453-466: reaffirmed the alliance with Rome. He hounded and eventually killed his brother-in-law, the Swabian King Recaredus (the first German king to convert to Catholicism), and expanded his dominion, forcing the Swabians to retreat into Galicia. After losing his brother Frederic in a war against Aegidius, who had proclaimed himself King of the Franks, he fixed his frontier with the Franks on the River Loire. He was disliked by some Visigoth nobles because of his attempts to re-establish relations with his kinsman Ricimer, de facto ruler of what remained of the Western Roman Empire, who had proclaimed Libius Severus emperor. He was eventually assassinated by his only surviving brother, Euric—a fitting end in view of his earlier fratricidal murder of Thorismond.

Euric, 466-484: when the Western Roman Empire fell in 476, the Kingdom of Toulouse became the most powerful of the barbarian dominions. In Spain, the only regions that remained free of the Visigoths were Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria and Vasconia, the frontiers of which were fortified. However, mass migrations to Spain eventually weakened the Visigoth hold over the Toulouse area. Euric was the author of the legal code that bears his name, the *Codex Euricianus*, part of which is preserved in the National Library in Paris. Of the 400 sections dealing with criminal and civil law, only fifty have come down to us. This was the first attempt to establish a legal system based on non-Roman principles. It adopted the Germanic principle of personality, whereby people were judged according to the group they belonged to, in opposition to the Roman principle of territoriality, which ensured the same treatment for all the inhabitants of a given territory.

Unusually for a Visigoth king, Euric died of natural causes!

Alaric II, 484-507: promulgated the so-called *Breviary of Alaric* or *Lex Romana Visigothorum* , a compilation of Roman laws subject to Germanic interpretation. He imposed this upon his Gallic and Hispano-Roman subjects and also caused resentment by introducing mass conscription (a measure which rebounded on the Visigoths, as previously only they had been entitled to bear arms) and insisting on Arian principles. Clovis's Franks had already converted to Catholicism and most of Alaric's Gallic and Hispano-Roman subjects were also of Catholic persuasion. This gave Clovis a pretext to invade and, in May 507, the opposing armies met on the Vogladensian Plains (Vouillé), near Poitiers, where Alaric lost both his kingdom and his life. North of the Pyrenees, the Visigoths were left only with Septimania (modern-day Languedoc-Roussillon), while Clovis secured the united territory that was to become France.

Gesalec, 507-511: natural son of Alaric II, he was proclaimed king, despite many people's reservations, before the funeral pyre of his father on the Vogladensian Plains. His chief merit was to have transferred the Visigoths safely to Spain, where Barcelona became their new capital.

But many nobles detested him because he was illegitimate. The Ostrogoth King Theodoric the Great, whose daughter Theodegotho had been Alaric's

wife and who wanted to put his grandson Amalaric on the throne, took advantage of the situation and sent an army against him under General Ibbas. Gesalec lost Barcelona and fled to Africa, where he formed an alliance with the Vandal King Thrasamund. Attempting to regain his throne in 511, he was captured and killed by Ostrogoth troops.

Amalaric, 511-531, under the tutelage of his grandfather Theodoric, 511-526: he came to the throne at the age of nine and remained under the authority of his famous Ostrogoth grandfather until the latter's death, on 13 August 526. He married Clothilde, daughter of the Frankish King Clovis (died 511) and tried in vain to convert her to Arianism. He even tortured her, so that in the end she sought the help of her brother Childebert, king of the Franks. Childebert declared war on Amalaric and defeated his army at Narbonne. It is said that Amalaric was assassinated by a Frank in a church in Barcelona, maybe to avenge poor Clothilde, who died before she reached Paris as a result of the ill-treatment she had suffered.

Theudis, 531-548: of Ostrogoth origin, he married an Hispano-Roman aristocrat of Catholic persuasion. On several occasions, he fought the Byzantines who, after Belesarius's victories in Africa, invaded Spain repeatedly. He established his capital at Emerita Augusta (Merida). He defended Spain against the Franks led by Childebert and his successor Clothar, who made several attempts to take Pamplona and Saragossa. His prosperous reign saw the growth of such cities as Seville and Toledo. But in the end, he too was murdered, a victim of the habitual jealousies, apparently by one of his guards in revenge for the assassination of Amalaric. He asked that his assassin be forgiven before giving up the ghost.

Theugidisel, 548-549: the last king of Ostrogoth lineage. He continued the policy of equal treatment for Hispano-Romans and Goths introduced by Theudis and moved his court to Seville. He seems to have been well loved by many of his subjects but he, too, was the victim of a plot, hatched this time by nobles of pure Visigoth descent.

Agila, 549-554: his reign marked a return to the pure Visigoth line, but also to an insistence of Arianism. The cities of Baetica rebelled, in particular Cordoba and Seville. The end of the Ostrogoth period of tenure also saw a breach with Byzantium, with which the Ostrogoths had been closely

allied since the time of Theodoric. Invited by the rebellious nobles, the Byzantines invaded the peninsula and established themselves on parts of the southern and eastern coasts. Agila is said to have been assassinated by Athanagild, a noblemen from Seville.

Athanagild, 554-557: transferred the capital to Toledo. He had to face up to the problem of the Byzantine invasion, paradoxically initiated when noblemen of his faction had asked for their help in deposing Agila (*Plus ça change* . . . An identical situation pertained 150 years later in the run-up to the Islamic invasion!). In the end, he was forced to come to terms and the Byzantines occupied the whole of the southern coastline between the Guadalete and Denia rivers. He died of natural causes, his succession causing serious problems for a people accustomed to regime change by *coup d'état*.

Liuva I, 567-572: after months of discussion and with civil war looming, Liuva, a nobleman from Seville of conciliatory disposition, was elected king. He turned out to be a good ruler: to meet the diverse needs of the peoples of his vast kingdom, he decided to entrust the government of Hispania to his brother Liuvigild, while himself ruling over Septimania.

Liuvigild, 568-586: the greatest of all Visigoth kings in terms of administrative, military and political ability. His reforms included the *Codex Revisus*, which for the first time allowed marriages between Goths and Hispano-Romans. He was successful in subduing the traditionally rebellious city of Cordoba and taking other difficult areas: the provinces of Salamanca, where he defeated the Rucconians, Zamorra, where he routed the Sappo tribe, and even Cantabria, hitherto invincible, where he took and sacked Amaya in 574. Finally, he founded the city of Reccaredo.

The life of this outstanding monarch is however tarnished by the rebellion of his son Hermenegild, his favourite son and heir, who had converted to Catholicism under the influence of his Frankish wife Ingunda (daughter of King Sigebert and Queen Brunhilda) and Bishop Leander of Seville. Hermenegild's abjuration of Arianism brought him into open conflict with his father and led him to ally himself with the Swabian King Miro. Having lost his ally in the disastrous Battle of Seville in 585, Hermenegild took refuge in a church in Cordoba, where he was found by some of his

father's supporters. His brother Reccared persuaded him to kneel and ask his father's forgiveness. Liuvigild forgave him and exiled him to Valencia. However, Hermenegild tried to escape and join his Catholic parents-in-law in France. He was captured once again and, this time, killed by a certain Count Sisbert. He was later canonised by the Catholic Church.

Reccared I, 586-601: a friend of Bishop Leander of Seville (older brother of the equally famous Isidore), he improved relations with the Catholic Church and eventually converted to Catholicism on 13 January 587. He sentenced Count Sisbert to death for killing his brother. Overcoming the plotting of Arian bishops and hostile nobles, he finally organised the Third Council of Toledo, where on 8 May 589 he declared the conversion of the Visigoth Kingdom of Spain to Catholicism. An excellent king, loved by the common people and, eventually, many of the nobles, he died a natural death, one year after his friend Leander.

Liuva II, 601-603: coming to the throne at the age of just eighteen, he tried to continue his father's Catholic policy, but the Arian nobles opposed him. Acting treacherously, the cruel Count Witeric had him deposed and killed.

Witeric, 603-610: tried to restore Arianism by force, provoking enormous resentment in a people now committed to the new religion. He was in turn betrayed and murdered during a banquet. His corpse was dragged through the streets of Toledo amid popular rejoicing and cast into a common grave.

Gundemar, 610-612: a good king (and a Catholic), he died of natural causes. During his reign, a synod was held which transferred the seat of religious authority from Cartago Nova to Toledo. Toledo thus became the religious and political capital of the kingdom.

Sisebut, 612-621: began the persecution of the Jews, forbidding them to marry outside their community, covert others to the Jewish faith or own slaves. A friend of Bishop Isidore of Seville, he is also known as the "writer king". His works included a hagiography of St. Desiderius and a poem in hexameters entitled the "Astronomicon". It is not clear whether he died of natural causes or was poisoned on the orders of his general Suintila.

Reccared II, 621: Sisebut's first-born son, he died in mysterious circumstances a few months after his coronation.

Suintila , 621-631: an outstanding general, he set about repressing a revolt by the Vasconians (Basques) then, having dealt with the North, turned his attention to the war against the Byzantines, whom he managed to drive out in 625. However, he irritated the nobles and bishops by removing some of their privileges, provoking a revolt led by Duke Sisenand. Sisenand defeated Suintila at the gates of Saragossa, having sought help from Dagobert, king of the Franks, to whom he paid an enormous sum in gold. Suintila retired to a monastery, where he died in obscurity.

Sisenand, 631-636: famous for covering the King of the Franks with gold (some say two-and-a-half hundredweight of the stuff!), in payment for his help in dethroning Suintila. He also convened the IV Council of Toledo, which decreed that kings should be elected by the bishops as well as the nobles. This marked a transfer of political power to the Church. He seems to have died of natural causes.

Chintila, 636-639: elected at the advanced age of eighty-six. His short reign saw an advance of feudalism and a weakening of the monarchy. In the Councils of Toledo, the Church became increasingly influential in matters of state. Titles of nobility and the holding of public office became hereditary. In this period, the Visigoth kingdom reached a peak of prosperity and there was a great flowering of art and culture.

Tulga, 639-642: son of Chintila, he lacked character and was easily dethroned by the noblemen Chindaswinth. He lived out his days in a monastery.

Chindaswinth, 642-653: crowned at the ripe old age of seventy-nine, he amazed everyone with his energy. He began by strengthening his position, ruthlessly eliminating hundreds of opponents and driving out a number of churchmen. He then relaxed and devoted himself to reforming the legal system, beginning work on the *Liber Iudiciorum* or *Lex Visigothorum*, which was subsequently completed by his son. Some sections of this legal code, later referred to as the "Fuero Juzgo", were used by Spanish courts until the late Middle Ages. According to legend, Chindaswinth (who at the

age of eighty-five married a girl of sixteen)was also the natural father of Duke Theofred (the father of King Roderic) and of Duke Fafila (father of Pelayo). He died peacefully in his bed at the age of ninety.

Recceswinth, 653-672: in 654, he completed the legal code begun by his father, finally establishing equality between Goths and Hispano-Romans. The use of Latin became the norm for administrative purposes. In 661, he founded a church in San Juan de Baños, modern Palenza, in gratitude for the beneficial effects of the spring waters in curing his kidney stones. The church is one of the oldest examples of Visigoth architecture in Spain, with horseshoe-shaped arches (of oriental inspiration). His magnificently worked golden crown can be seen in the Archaeological Museum in Madrid. His reign marked the high point of Visigoth civilisation.

Wamba, 672-680: a decline set in, though Wamba (not of Balthi lineage) was a good king and loved by his people. He was friends with Bishop Julian of Toledo, who wrote the *Historia Regis Wambae*. He suppressed revolts in Vasconia and, yet again, in Septimania. He also was responsible for a reform whereby the aristocracy and clergy were required to fund military campaigns when necessary. During his reign, news began to arrive of Arab conquests in Africa. Meanwhile, the nobles became increasingly restless because of the taxes Wamba levied on them (though this only increased his popularity among the lower classes). On 4 October 680, Count Erwig hatched a plot, pretending that Wamba had been poisoned, and Bishop Julian was called to perform extreme unction. When Wamba woke up, it was too late: Erwig had already been elected in his stead. Wamba tried in vain to recover his throne but was obliged to retire to a monastery in Pampliega (Burgos), where he later died.

Erwig, 680-687: known as "the Greek", because his father, Ardabast, had been expelled from the Byzantine court. He was quick to ingratiate himself with the clergy, who had objected to Wamba's taxes, by encouraging persecution of the Jews and giving greater executive power to the bishops. He repealed his predecessor's military reforms, freeing nobles and clergy from the obligation to perform military service and instead recruiting troops from the lower classes. He died of an illness, immediately after appointing his son-in-law Ergica as his successor.

Ergica, 687-702: Wamba's cousin and husband of Cixilona, Erwig's daughter. During his reign, the Visigoth state continued to decline amid economic crisis. Erwig had concentrated enormous power and many privileges in the hands of his own family. When Ergica tried to restore the balance and grant a fair deal to the common people, his widowed mother-in-law Liuvigoto rebelled and, with the help of Bishop Sisbert and a nobleman called Sunifred, recruited an army and captured Toledo in 692. However, Ergica escaped, took refuge with friendly neighbours and then returned with a large army to rout the rebels. Having defeated them, he convened the XVI Council of Toledo. Sisbert was stripped of his office and excommunicated, and all his possessions were confiscated. Sunifred had his eyes put out, while Liuvigoto was forced to take the veil and locked away in a convent.

Towards the end of Ergica's reign, bubonic plague broke out in the North and in Septimania. He also enacted harsh laws persecuting the Jews. His son Wittiza was made Duke of Galicia in 698 and established his residence at Tuy.

There were rumours of an attempted landing on the coast of Murcia, but it is not clear whether the invaders were Byzantines or Muslims. Their advance was stopped by a certain General Theodomir.

Wittiza, 702-710: tried to restore friendly relations with the Jews, inviting back the many who had fled or been exiled. He was widely disliked and had to quell many revolts, including one led by Duke Theofred (father of King Roderic) in Cordoba. Wittiza defeated him and had his eyes put out. There are stories of other acts of violence, including the strangling of Fafila, father of Pelayo, because, when Wittiza was still Duke of Galicia, Fafila had refused to let Wittiza enjoy his wife.

Wittiza had three sons: Agila, Olmund and Ardabast. On his death, civil war broke out between the supporters of Agila, who was only ten years old, and those of Roderic, Duke of Baetica, the son of Theofred. It was therefore a struggle for power between the descendants of Wamba and those of Chindaswinth (of Balthi lineage).

Roderic's faction came out on top, forcing the boy Agila and his supporters to take refuge in the regions of Narbonne and Tarragona.

Wittiza's brother, Oppa, bishop of Seville, fled to Ceuta, where he consorted with the Byzantine Count Julian, who commanded the straits, and the exiled Bishop Sisbert (who had conspired with Liuvigoto). Julian held a grudge against Roderic, who is said to have raped his daughter Florinda while she was a guest at his court.

Roderic, 710-711: the last king in this saga. To get rid of Roderic, the supporters of Wittiza, with prompting from bishops Oppa and Sisbert, sought help from the Arabs in the person of Musa, governor of North Africa. Julian of Ceuta was prepared to lend ships for the crossing of the straits.

Most authors believed this operation began in April 711, but some Muslim chroniclers mention the year 92 (which began in October 710), so it is theoretically possible that the landings began in the previous autumn, after a reconnaissance operation that August by Tarif ibn Malik.

In any case, a contingent of seven thousand men under Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the strait and disembarked near a great rock known as Calpe, subsequently named Jabal Tariq (and in due course Gibraltar). A further five thousand were subsequently sent by Musa (the sources are not unanimous about the timing).

In the week between 19 and 26 July 711, an army of some 40,000 Visigoths clashed with 12,000 Muslims, according to some accounts at Medina Sidonia, according to others on the banks of the River Guadalete. The Muslims were joined by auxiliaries led by supporters of Wittiza, including bishops Sisbert and Oppa.

There are many legends regarding the death of Roderic. Some say he was killed by Tariq himself on the banks of the river, others that he escaped and hid in a monastery until the day of his death, others that he was drowned. Years later, a tomb is said to have been discovered near Viseu, in today's Portugal, bearing the inscription: *Rodericus Rex.*

Map of Visigoth Spain: by convention, names are kept in Latin up to 710 A.C., the year that marks the end of Ancient Age in Spanish historical atlases. However, full vulgarization took longer to generate names in modern Castilian and was also subject to Arabic influence. Here, regional subdivision follows the administration reform done by King Liuvigild (ruling between 568 and 586 A.C.) and his son Reccared (586-601). One can see that Autrigonia included all Asturias, Cantabria and Vasconia. Yet real Autrigonians lived in an area that could today approximately be drawn between Cantabria and Pays Basques. The use of one word to cover all those territories probably reflects Visigoth kings' determination to unify once for ever all those rebellious lands.

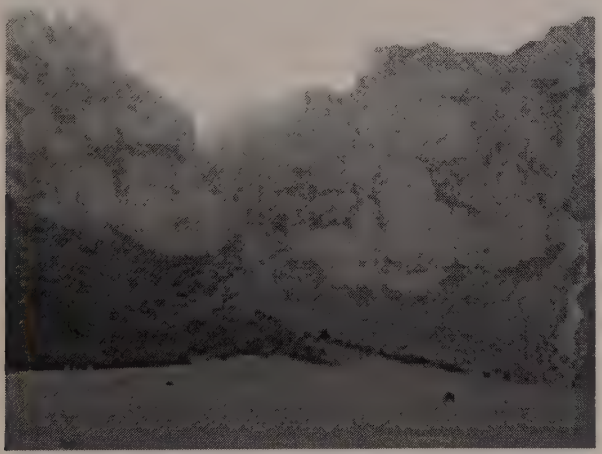
Ancient palace (Valle de Ason, Cantabria)

Southern Mountain Front of Amaya: where the seize of Amaya is set up (Ch 23-25), That very famous Roman oppidum does not exist anymore and you can only see a little village of few houses and even a school today.

Amaya: today's a little village (hardly shown even in the maps), it is just a shadow of the splendid fortress ruled by the Duke of Amaya to defend access to Cantabria. From this picture you cannot believe this was one of the richest Iberian towns in Roman Empire.

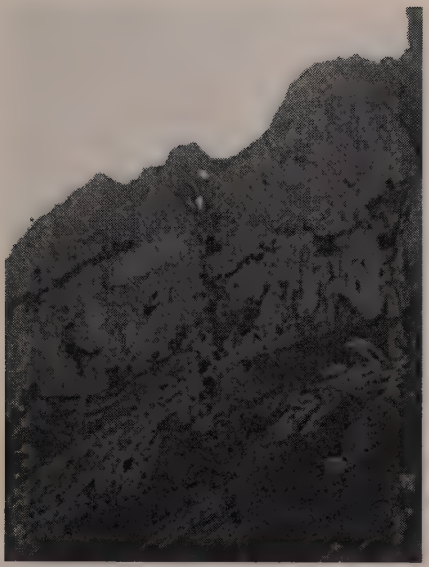
Panes (VIIIth century church): the village is mentioned in Ch XII.

The Monastery of San Martin de Turieno: (today Santo Toribio de Liébana) where Fafila, Pelayo's son and Froliuba, the hero—fallen-in-battle Teodomiro's daughter, are supposed to marry. This still exists today and was also visited by Pope John Paul II. It is an important place of pilgrimage and it really has the special Salvation Door the author mentions in the romance.



The source of the Deva: where the voracious Xanas are said to be dwelling.

Santa Maria de Flebenia: (today Lebeña), which the author converted into the abandoned Benedictine Chapel of the Angels of Love, in the romance. In reality it was built in 925 and it is one of the oldest and most beautiful samples of Mozarabic architecture in Spain. "I really love that little Chapel, hidden in the mountains, which I just found one day by chance", says the author, ". . . and there is a romantic story behind it!" The nobel Conde Alfonso (and his wife Justa), who founded it, did try to translate the body of San Toribio from the next door monastery of San Martin (above picture) but when his servants and his soldiers tried to bury the relics they all fell blind. Conde Alfonso then understood God did not want his holy Toribio to be removed and so Conde Alfonso donated the new church (of Santa Maria), all his possessions and even his body and that of his wife to the monastery of San Martin (today San Toribio).



Mysterious mountains: this is the valley where mountains have eyes as if they are those of the Giants Ezla. Legend wants those giants tied for ever to the walls of these mountains as punishment for their betrayal of Goddess Astyr's trust (creator of Asturias) for having an affair with the beautiful Xanas.

Puente de La Reina: in fact it is today the Embalse de Riano. However the ancient medieval bridge still exist, if you watch it carefully. "I was lucky to see it, because you can only see it when the lake is dry!", the author tells.

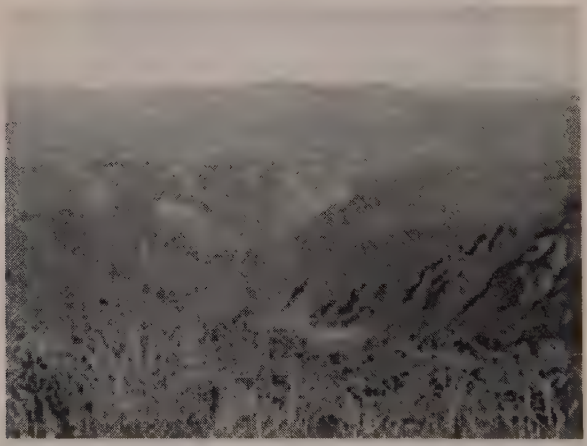
Rio Deva: ". . . and its gloomy and dark waters scared even me!", the author tells. There were supposed to appear the Xanas , to seduce men and then devour them!

The church of Santa Cruz de la Victoria: built by Fafila, son of Pelayo, possibly in 737, in honour of his father and the victory of Covadonga.

The splendid scenarios of Covadonga (I): here the author imagined the last cavalry charges against the Saracens (Christians riding down the slope).

Lago Ercina: when the fog falls, it looks really dark and ghosty!

Lago Ercina: convinced?



The splendid scenarios of Covadonga (II): in the middle of the Picos de Europa.

Akathistos: ancient hymn in honour of the Virgin Mary. The author is unknown, but it is often attributed to Romano Melode (5th century) and interpreted as an expression of thanks for the protection of the city of Constantinople, threatened with invasion by barbarian hordes. The term suggests that the hymn should be sung standing. Liturgically speaking, it is a *kontakion*, a form which first developed in the Byzantine Christian tradition at the end of the 5th century, consisting of an introduction (*proimion*) and a number of stanzas (*ikoi*). In later centuries, the form was replaced by the *kanon*. Only one such hymn has come down to us: the Akathistos prayed by Toribio in this instance. (*O. Raquez, Guide to the Celebration of the Divine Office in the Churches of Byzantine Tradition, LIPA, Rome, 2002*)

Acazia: Byzantine sailing ship used for cargo transport, full-bodied and round in the hull.

Al Hizam (Toledo): site where the Alcazar now stands, the building housing Toledo's library (see below).

Alaric the Great: founder of the Balthi dynasty, first warlord and legendary hero of the Visigoth race. Already king of all the Visigoth tribes in 394, he led his people on their great march from the banks of the Danube to Italy. He died in 410, after the infamous Sack of Rome.

Alexandrite: stone to which healing and regenerative properties were attributed.

Allah Akbar! : Allah is great!

Angels of Love (Church of): The author drew inspiration from the lovely little church of Santa Maria de Lebeña (formerly Flebeña) (below), hidden away among the mountain gorges through which the Deva runs. The church was in fact built in 925 by a Count Alfonso and his wife, whose will has come down to us. The church, with all its revenues, was then given to the nearby monastery of San Martìn de Turieno (now San Toribio): Alfonso's penance for attempting to misappropriate the remains of the saint and have them buried in the new church. (The count's will is worth reading to get an idea of his sense of guilt and the immense value ascribed to a relic in those times). The church is one of the oldest examples of mozarabic architecture in the whole of Spain.

Anno domini . . . : in the year of the Lord . . . The Church often uses this Latin expression before the number of the year, dating events from the birth of Christ. However, in the Middle Ages, people rarely counted the years in this way. Generally, they referred back to epoch-making events (wars, floods, famines, droughts, epidemics, the deaths or coronations of kings, etc.) that had remained impressed on the collective memory.

Antequera: Roman Anticaria.

Ardabast (also Ardón): little-known son of King Witiza. Like his brother Agila, he survived the end of the kingdom in 711, but only for a few years, probably dying in 720. It would seem that Witiza also had a third son, Olmund, of whom even less is known.

Ardaric: in AD 451, the Cataulanian Fields, near the French city of Troyes, were the scene of a battle between Attila the Hun, supported by Gepids and Ostragoths, and the troops of the Roman general Aetius, helped by Franks, Visigoths and Burgundians. The chief of the Gepids, from whom the modern-day Czechs are said to descend, was called Ardaric.

Arius (doctrine of): according to the teaching of Arius, which spread in the 3rd century, Jesus was "created" by the Father and so could not be of the same nature, i.e. eternal, but was a man raised to the highest degree of perfection. Convened by the Emperor Constantine, the Council of Nicea (325) condemned Arianism and established that Jesus, the Son, was begotten, not made, and consubstantial with the Father. Therefore Father, Son and Holy Spirit were three distinct parts of the same same person at one and the same time (Unus et Trinus). To this day, the Catholic prayer, The Creed, enshrines this concept.

Asta (River): river that runs into the sea at a Villaviciosa. The name Asta is marked on 18th-century maps. At Luggones it divides into two branches: to the north the Nalon, to the south the Alluniego. Between the two stood the city of Oviedo.

Astorga: Roman Asturica Augusta.

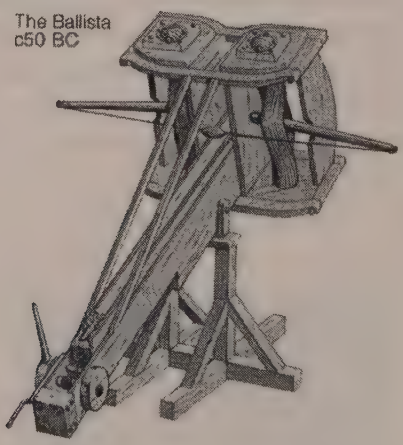
Aturia (River): now possibly the Ason, in eastern Cantabria.

Auca: later Oca, already seat of a bishopric in 589.

Autrigonians: the ancient people who lived in what is now eastern Cantabria. The term Autrigonia was still widely used in Visigoth codices until the 7th century.

Ballista: derived from the oxybeles. In the case of the ballista, torsion was generated by twisting skeins of rope or animal sinew around pins.

Already used by the Romans, its relatively small size made it popular as a siege engine and for defending fortified positions throughout the early Middle Ages. It was also used as a tactical weapon on the battlefield and in naval warfare.



Balthi: dynasty deriving from Baltha, legendary ancestor of the Visigoth race, when all the Goths were still living on the Gøtland peninsula (now part of Sweden). From here they migrated to Poland in the first century BC. The dynasty remained more or less pure until King Recceswinth (died 672). The following kings—Wamba, Ervig, Egica and Witiza—were not of true Balthi lineage. However, it seems that Roderic (reigned 710-711) was.

Barcelona: Roman Barcino.

Bauti: anarchic race of peasants. They were often a thorn in the flesh of the Romans, and later of the Visigoths.

Belisarius: legendary general of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. In 533, he led an expeditionary force to North Africa and destroyed the kingdom of the Vandals, already weakened by power struggles that had begun with the death of King Genseric and by continuous fighting with Berber tribes.

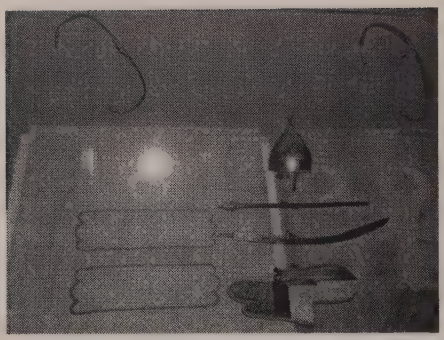
Berbers: a very old expression (from *barbarói*, barbarians), used by the first Greek explorers to describe the peoples of the Maghreb. Gradually, during the Middle Ages, it came to replace the terms Mauritanians or Tingitani (from Tingis, later Tangiers). However, originally it referred only to the populations living in the hinterland of the Maghreb, not the coastal peoples. The Berbers were already recognised as having features distinct from those of other African or Arab peoples (they are in fact of European origin).

Betanzos: Roman Brigantium. Present-day La Coruña, Galicia.

Betica: Roman Baetica, southern region of Roman Spain.

Bow (double-S-shaped): a weapon developed by the Arabs. It gets its name from the fact that, when not under tension, its curvature was in the opposite direction to that in which the bow was bent in use. When in use, the tension on the string imparted a double "S"-shaped curve to the bow.

Bow (composite): known in the East since earliest times, it was made of mixed materials (wood, bone, sinew, horn) to make it stronger and more elastic. The double-S-shaped bow was a variant adopted and developed by the Arabs.



Examples of Saracen weapons The double-S-shaped bow

Byzantium: city on the Bosphorus enlarged and fortified by the Emperor Constantine, and renamed Constantinople, in the 4th century. However, the original name remained current for many centuries.

Bishaya (Mountains): now Besaya (cf. Biscay).

Braga: Roman Bracara.

Busento (Calabria): after the Sack of Rome in AD 410, Alaric wanted to set sail and conquer North Africa, in those days rich in resources and the granary of the whole Empire. But when he reached Cosenza, he fell sick, probably with malaria, and died. Legend has it that his generals, not wanting the enemy to find the body of their king, diverted the waters of the River Busento, using slave labour on a vast scale. The king was then buried in the river bed with a great hoard of treasure, and the river subsequently re-directed into its normal course. It is also said that the slaves employed in this enormous operation were put to death, so that no one would be able to report the exact place of Alaric's burial.

Caesaraugusta: another city founded by the Romans, later Zaragoza (Saragozza).

***Caetrae*:** Small circular shields, known to have been used by Cantabrian warriors as early as the time of the Roman invasion.

Calahorra: Roman Calagurris.

Chaldeans: an ancient name for the Arabs.

Calpe (Mount): later known as Jabal Tariq (Tariq's rock), and subsequently Gibraltar.

Cataulanian Plains: near the French city of Troyes. Here, in AD 451, Attila was defeated by the troops of General Aetius, supported by the Visigoths of Theodoric I, who was killed in the battle.

Cangas de Onis: Roman *Cannica* (or *Cannicia*), on account of the thickets of reeds that covered large areas of eastern Asturias.

Cartagena: Roman Cartago Nova.

Carteia: more or less where Algeciras stands today, near Gibraltar.

Catafracts: armour made of metal scales, often an alternative to chain mail (made of metal rings).

Cantabrian horses: Cantabria and the Asturias were renowned for breeding fine horses from classical times. It was not difficult to procure good ones, even in the High Middle Ages. Elsewhere in Europe, horses tended to be expensive.

Cantabrian Wars: these lasted from AD 29 to AD 19. The Emperor Octavian Augustus eventually subjugated the rebels and thereby completed the Roman conquest of Spain.

Cider: the author cannot confirm that cider was already familiar in 8th-century Asturias. What is certain is that it is now the typical beverage of the region. We know that it was being produced in Normandy at the end of the first millennium, and that William the Conqueror imported it into England in 1066. The first official treatise on cider was published in 1588 by the French scholar Julien Le Paulmier, who was physician to Charles IX and Henry III. He wrote of its digestive and diuretic properties, and its ability to counteract influenza. In Chapter V, the author pays tribute to his own discovery of this green, full-bodied Asturian beverage, which

occurred in an inn in the little port of Llanes, when he was preparing his first draft of the romance.

Coimbra: Roman Conimbriga

Colobium: kind of tight-fitting tunic

Compline: *quasi dies completa.* The hour following vespers, before the final time of prayer and withdrawal for the night. It could therefore coincide with supper time and the actual time varied greatly over the course of the year, depending on the length of the day.

Copybooks: the first books, made in the 3rd and 4th centuries, consisted simply of pages of papyrus or parchment, folded and put together to form copybooks.

Council of Toledo (third): held during the reign of King Recared, in AD 589. It marked the conversion of the Visigoth king to Catholicism.

Cordoba: Roman Corduba.

Corduba: today Cordoba.

Cornelian: a dull red or reddish-white chalcedony, in widespread use in the Middle Ages and already known to the Romans, who imported it from the East. There are some splendid examples of cornelian cameos and seals in the archeaological museum at Aquileia (Friuli, Italy).

Corocotta: The emergence of this hero in the history of the warlike Cantabrian people cannot be dated with certainty. It took Rome two hundred years to subdue Hispania, and as many as seven legions (70,000 men). The conquest began with the landing of Scipio in 218 BC, initially as part of his wars against the Carthaginians. The Cantabrians were the last people to be subdued by Octavian, between 29 and 19 BC. Legend has it that Corocotta presented himself to the Romans to claim the bounty of 250,000 sestertii that had been put on his head. Faced with such audacity, the Emperor decided to let him go free.

Constantine (Roman Emperor): after the death of Diocletian in 305, the Empire was ruled by a series of tetrarchs, who immediately began to fight among themselves. In 306, Caesar Costantius I Clorus died and his son Constantine was elected to take his place by the troops faithful to his father. Constantine then formed an alliance with Licinius, the friend and successor of Galerius. Constantine defeated his rival Maxentius, elected by the rebellious Roman populace, in 312 at Saxa Rubra, near the Milvian Bridge at the very gates of Rome. Licinius defeated the other tetrarch, Maximinus, in the East in 313.

In February of the same year, Constantine and Licinius, after meeting in Milan, issued the famous edict providing for toleration of all religious faiths (. . . *so that the Highest God in heaven, whoever he may be, may show himself favourable to the Empire* . . .). This was a vital turning point in the history of Christianity.

Covadonga: Cueva de Nuestra Señora (Cueva Dominga), in Latin Cava Dominica, in reference to the apparition of the Virgin. Some versions of the legend have it that Pelayo saw the Virgin Mary in a grotto before the battle. The author has opted for the plural (Cave Dominiche), to emphasise the fact that there were many caves in the area, and the most important apparition, in popular tradition, was that of the Virgin on the summit of Mt. Auseva.

Crismon: the Greek monogram of Christ, with the letter P superimposed on the letter X.

Cromatius of Aquileia: Cromatius was bishop of Aquileia towards the end of the 4th century, an important time in the evangelisation of Pannonia (modern Hungary) and the right bank of the Danube.

***Dominula*:** demoiselle, young lady.

***Domnus/a*:** from the Latin *dominus/domina*, transformed into *don* and *doña* in the early years of the second millennium (terms already found in the *Cantar de mio Cid*, one of the earliest poems referred to in the history of Castilian Spanish).

Dromons: Byzantine warships, long and slender, usually with two banks of oars and sails. The better-known galley was not produced by the Byzantine arsenals until half-way the Middle Ages. It was a half-way-house between the dromon and the Greek chelandia.

Ebro (River): known to the Romans as the Iber, from which we get Iberia.

Federati : the Visigoths were given the status of Confederates by Constantine in 332.

Forum Juliae: modern-day Friuli, the north-eastern region of Italy, bordering on Austria and Slovenia.

***Fundibula*:** catapults/slings. The Alfonsine Chronicles (written in the reign of Alfonso III, in the second half of the 9th century) describe flexible poles with a leather bag, which were used to hurl stones much farther than was possible with related hand-held weapons.

Celestical fire: meteor. Known to the Romans as *caelestis fax* or *caelestis ignes*.

Gades (River): named after the Roman city of Gades, later Cadiz (Cadice). The river was in fact called the Guadalete, a name probably given it by the Arabs.

Galicia: region of north-western Spain, Roman Gallaecia.

Galla Placidia: Galla Placidia, sister of the Emperor Honorius, married the Visigoth King Athaulf in 414. Their dramatic love story was the stuff of romance for centuries to come.

Genizah: room in a synagogue used for storing old texts and materials.

Jacobus (St. James apostle): James the Great (*Iacopus*, or *Iacobus*, in Latin, the "I" subsequently becoming a "J"). In Spanish, he is known as Santiago (from Sanctus Jaco) and gives his name to Santiago de Compostela (St. James of Compostela), where according to the *Historia Compostelana* his tomb was discovered in the early 9th century.

Gigia: Roman town on the Asturian coast, also know as Campus Turris. Later Xixón, then Gisjón. Its modern name is Gijón.

Julián (bishop): Bishop Julián of Toledo, subsequently Saint Julián, died in 692. He should not of course be confused with Count Julián of Ceuta, who came to prominence at the time of the Arab invasion, in 711.

Grande Sierra: the sierra referred to here is the Sierra del Guadarrama, the extensive mountain chain forming the backdrop to Madrid.

Hearth: an open fireplace in the room itself, the smoke from which was evaculated through a hole in the roof. Not to be confused with a fireplace with a flue to channel the smoke, which did not appear in Europe until the 10th century.

Hispalis: Seville.

Hypocaust: Roman central heating system, whereby warm air from a furnace was circulated through underfloor ducting.

***Inter meridiem et occasum solis*:** south-west.

***Inter meridiem et orientem solem*:** south-east.

Kairouan: now in Tunisia, city founded in 670 by Uqba son of Nafi.

La ilaha illa Allah!: well-known Muslim war cry, referred to as early as the seventh century. It means: There is no other God but Allah". According to Islamic scholars, it should be interpreted as follows: *Allah is our Lord*

and God: there is no other Lord or God but Him. Him alone we worship and His government alone we submit to.

Legio: latter-day León.

Leòn: Roman Legio.

Lorica lamellata: the standard-issue armour of Roman soldiers, consisting of horizontal strips tied at the front by leather laces.

Lugo: Roman Lucus Augusti.

Luivigoto (revolt of): see under Sunifred

Malaga: Roman Malaca.

Malaric (king of the Swabians): the Visigoth King Liuvigild defeated and killed the Swabian King Miro, who had formed an alliance with Liuvigild's son Hermenegild, in the Battle of Seville in 582. In 585, Liuvigild had Hermenegild condemned to death. In the same year, he defeated Audeca, who had usurped the Swabian throne from Miro's son Ebroric, took all the treasures and territories of the Suebian kingdom, and installed Visigoth dukes in Viseu, Oporto, Braga, Tuy and Lugo. The Swabian pretender Malaric rose in rebellion but was unable to regain his lost kingdom. The ancient Swabian kingdom corresponds to modern-day Portugal (with the exception of Galicia, which is part of Spain).

Mangonel: a siege engine introduced into Europe by the Avars. Perfected by Byzantine engineers and adopted by the Carolingian artillery in the second half of the 9th century, it depended on human brawn. The throwing arm was activated by tens of soldiers, who ran backwards pulling on long ropes attached to the lower end of the arm.

Marsiglia: Roman Massilia.

Mauritanians: old term for the inhabitants of north-west Africa (Arab: Maghreb). The Romans distinguished between Mauritania Tingitania (from Tingis, Tangiers, now Morocco) and Cesarense (now Algeria).

Merida: Roman Emerita.

Metropolitan: This was the title given to the bishops of the most important cities, normally sees chosen for Church Councils. The term, of Greek origin, has remained in current use in the Othodox Church.

Mezuzah: case or box affixed to the door of a synagogue for holding a parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah.

***Minima*:** small coins. In the Late Empire, in various areas of the Mediterranean, the *nummo* was also used. The museum at Aquileia (Friuli, Italy) has some specimens in its collection. When the Empire came to an end, the production and circulation of coins slowed down and almost ceased in much of Western Europe. The situation was not restored until the political and economic reorganisation brought about by Charlemagne.

***Missus*:** Messenger/envoy. Later, in feudal times, the word herald was used to denote an official court messenger.

Monophysitism and **Monothelitism:** doctrines arising from the controversies that followed the Council of Ephesus (431), when the monk Eutyches maintained that Christ was of but one, divine, nature. The Monophysite controversy tore apart the court and people of Byzantium, until, towards the end of the 7th century, the Emperor Heraclius supported the doctrine of Monothelitism, according to which the two natures of Christ are reconciled in a single will (*monos telos*). This formula (known as the *Ectesis*) was imposed by the Patriarch Sergius and helped to bring peace between the Eastern and Roman churches for about a decade, until in 692 the Emperor Justinian II convened the Council of the Trullo, so-called because of the domed roof of the room in which it was held. Wanting to impose the Byzantine rites and customs on the whole Church, he re-opened the schism. The author has often wondered whether all these controversies within the Christian community regarding the nature of Christ may not have facilitated the surprisingly rapid spread of Islam during that period. It is as if the believers in the Middle East, already alienated by Byzantium's constant wars against them, grew tired of having to make sense of all these complexities, which after all were served up by the invading power. The Koran was far simpler and easier to understand, and was preached by one

of their own. This could explain the strong hold gained by Islam. It was not concerned with the whys and wherefores (often viewed as human preoccupations), but required surrender to God (*moslèm*) and nothing more.

Mozarabs: the term used for Christians who were willing to be subject to the invading power, but without converting to Islam. Spanish Christians who did convert to Islam were referred to *muladies (muwalladun).*

Mohammed: from the beginning, Muslims have always referred to Mohammed as the Prophet, written with a capital letter.

Muslims: (from *moslèm*), those who surrender to God. Going by 9th and 10th-century codices, however, many Christian chroniclers referred to the invaders in terms that expressed their different racial origins (Saracens, Arabs, Chaldeans, Ishmaelites, Berbers, Mauritanians, etc.). From this, the author deduces that use of the term *moslèm* was still generally restricted to the Muslim community itelf when Islam began its great expansion.

Narbona: Roman Narbo.

Nestorius (doctrine of): the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, had formulated a theory whereby Christ consisted in two persons, one human and one divine, and therefore two natures. He was opposed by Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, who had Nestorius' theory condemned by the Council of Ephesus (431). This Council ruled that in Christ the two natures constituted a single person. The controversy dragged on and was complicated by the assertion of the monk Eutyches that Christ was of a single, divine, nature. This generated the Monophysite doctrine, which remained in fashion in Byzantium for almost three centuries. In 449, Pope Leo I intervened and, in his authoritative *Tome to Flavian* (Nestorius's successor in Constantinople) repeated what had been said by Cyril in Ephesus, declaring that two natures, human and divine, co-existed in the one person of Christ.

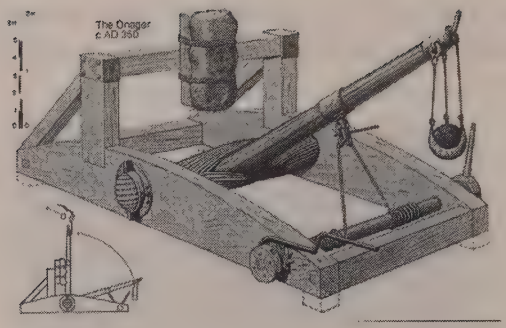
Oak cross: According to tradition, the oak cross picked up by Pelayo on the battlefield was kept in the church that Fafila had built at Cangas de

Onis a few years after his father's death. The little church was then named Iglesia de la Santa Cruz and survives to this day (see below).

Officium Palatinum: the Aula Regia, or royal council chamber.

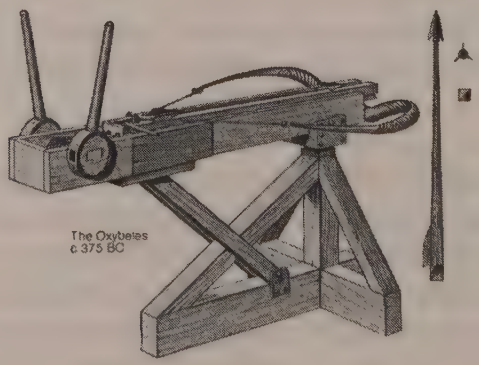
Omnis enim qui male agit odit lucem . . . : "Bad men all hate the light and avoid it, for fear their practices should be shown up. The honest man comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that God is in all he does." (John 3, 20-21).

Onager: siege engine which worked on the same principle as the ballista, except that the torsion mechanism was placed horizontally not vertically, in relation to the supporting frame. This made the engine easier to contruct, but put greater strain on the working parts. At the end of its course, the throwing arm thudded into a fixed padded crossbar. Because it was larger than a ballista, hurling larger projectiles to greater distances, it was not suited to tactical use.



Oppidum: fortified settlement. *Oppidae* were common in the provinces of the Roman Empire.

Oxybeles: (Greek = bolt shooter) oversized bow deriving its thrust from the elasticity of the materials used, normally wood , but possibly a combination of bone, sinew and horn, on the pattern of composite bows. It was possible to bend bows up to 4.5 metres long and with a maximum diameter of 30 cm. They were apparently introduced by the Greeks and it is said that Archimedes constructed a 5.5 metre model capable of throwing a 78 kg stone a distance of 185 metres. In the Middle Ages, they were used only sporadically, but it was a long time before they disappeared completely.



Oviedo: Roman Ovetum. In some 9th-century codices, it is referred to as Ovetao.

Palencia: Roman Palantia

Pamplona: Roman Pampilonia.

Panpipes (Syrinx): the flute of Greek and Roman shepherds in classical times. It consisted of a number of cane pipes of different lengths, tied together in a row.

Perilous (Lake): The author drew inspiration here from the Lake of Ercina, near Covadonga. It appears very forbidding when shrouded in mist.

***Petra fixa*:** in Spanish *pedrafita*. A *petra fixa* (the terms *piedrafita* and *piedrahita* are also frequent in Asturian place names) was normally a tall, isolated monolith, or standing stone, which people used to get an idea of the time of day by taking a bearing on the position of the sun. The author intends here to pay tribute to the black monolith which is a constant presence in Stanley Kubrik's "Space Odyssey 2001".

Pilonia (River Piloña): now known as the River Infiesto.

Pilum: a short javelin issued to the Roman army.

Pipin of Heristal (or Herstal): At the time of our story, the true king of the Franks was still Dagobert III, but the mayors of the palace were now ruling to all intents and purposes on behalf of the last Merovingian kings (who because of their passivity were known as the *rois fainéants*). This is how the house of Pipin of Herstal came to power at the end of the 7th century.

Pisoraca: later Pisuerga.

Porto Blendio: modern-day Suances.

Porto Vereasueca: now San Vicente de la Barquera.

***Pulmentaria*:** a vegetable broth.

Reina (Bridge and Lake of the): It is difficult to know what the present-day lake of the Riaño was called in the 8th century. However, the oldest maps often bear the term Reyna (Venta della Reyna) in those parts. While travelling along the sun-drenched banks of the mysterious lake one morning in September 2006, the author noticed an old bridge on the bottom of the driest part.

Rice cooked in milk: rice was known as early as Roman times, when it was imported from the East. It was nevertheless a rare sight on Western tables during the first millennium.

Roman Sea: one of the ways the Mediterreanean was referred to in the early Middle Ages.

Round capes: the so-called Mantum Hispani, referred to by St. Isidorus in his *Historia Visigothorum*. Maybe the forerunner of the poncho.

Sack of Rome: took place on 24 August 410. It is said that Alaric gave the order to spare the Christian places of worship and the city's most famous monuments, since he was a lover of art and beauty.

Salamanca: Roman Salmantica.

San Emeterio: Portus Victoriae in Roman times, now Santander, the chief city of Cantabria.

San Martino (de Turieno): the famous monastery of Liebana (below left, the main entrance, and right, the Puerta del Perdón), now known as San Toribio, was formerly known as San Martin de Turieno, possibly in honour of St. Martin of Tours, who is said to have converted the local people to Christianity

Santa Maria de Monsacri: The author drew inspiration from the convent of Santa Maria La Real de Piasca, which is documented at least since the year 941.

Sea of Ice: obviously the Baltic. The Goths emerged from the Baltic peninsula of Gøtland, now part of Sweden, around 50 BC.

Soap: had already been discovered in the 2nd century by the Gauls, but they used it as a pomade for the hair or for medicinal purposes.

Saracens: the word was used from Hellenistic times as a catch-all term to indicate all the peoples of the Middle East and, in the Middle Ages, also the peoples of North Africa. It signified literally "of the stock of Sarah". Sarah

was the wife of Abraham and from Sarah's slave-girl, Hagar, was born Ismael, regarded as the ancestor of the Arab peoples. So the descendants of Hagar were often referred to as Saracens, or Hagarenes, or Ismaelites.

Saxa Rubra: see under Constantine.

Greaves: lower leg armour, which are known to have been used since ancient Greek times.

***Septem triones*:** North.

Shalands: Arab warship derived from the Greek chelandia, larger and slower than the Byzantine dromon.

Sidonia: also Medina-Sidonia, Roman Asidonia, known to have had its own bishop as early as 610. Many historians identify it as the starting point of the legendary battle of Guadalete (or Lake Janda). The town still exists, lying half way between Cadiz (Roman Gades) and Algeciras (corresponding roughly to the site of Roman Carteia).

Sisbertus (bishop): he engineered a revolt against King Ergica, in 692, by plotting with Sunifred and Liuvigoto, then fled to Ceuta, where he formed an alliance with Count Julian and the Saracens.

Sisebut (king): reigned from 612 to 621. Also known as the "writer king", because of a book he wrote on astronomy (in hexameters!).

Siviglia: Roman Hispalis.

St. Firmino: St. Firmino of Pamplona, who seems to have lived in the 4th century, famous for the evangelisation of Amiens and the extreme north of the Roman Empire.

Steel: the reference here is of course not to stainless steel, which was not patented until 1913, nor to crucible steel, first produced in England in 1740.

However, a form of steel (packet steel) was known from classical times and effectively consisted of iron from which impurities (e.g. sulphur and phosphorus) had been removed, mixed with cast iron rich in carbon. But it was very difficult to produce (it came only from Sweden), and very expensive. It was therefore used only for swords and essential items of armour.

Straw hats (Sombrerinos): the Cantabrian *sombrerino* was a simple straw hat, possibly the ancestor of the larger *sombrero* now associated with Mexico.

Spatharii: Royal bodyguards, established as part of King Wamba's (reigned 672-680) military reforms. In the romance, in the absence of a Visigoth king, they are Pelayo's lieutenants.

Sunifred and Liuvigoto (revolt of): referred to in chapters two and twelve. Liuvigoto, widow of Erwig, and the nobleman Sunifred had taken part in Bishop's Sisbertus's uprising against King Ergica in 692. King Erwig (reigned 680-687) was known as "the Greek", being the son of the Greek Ardabast, who was said to have been expelled from the Byzantine court and to have married a cousin of the old King Chindaswinth (reigned 642-653). Liuvigoto, on the other hand, was a cousin of King Wamba (reigned 672-680). The uprising failed, Sunifred had his eyes put out, and Luivigoto was forced to become a nun. Bishop Sisbertus apparently made his way to Ceuta, where, with the Byzantine Count Julian, he is believed to have engineered the first landing of Tariq ibn Ziyad's Berbers.

Swabians: a people of Germanic origin who invaded Iberia in the 4th and 5th centuries, settling in Galicia and the western part of the peninsula (Lusitania). Their kingdom came to an end at the end of the 6th century, when they submitted to the Visigoths under King Liuvigild (AD 585). Centuries later, much of the territory they occupied became modern Portugal.

Synagogue administrator: the ruler/administrator of a synagogue (the interior of Toledo's synagogue is pictured below).

Tabularium: Roman public archive

Tangiers: Roman Tingis. The author has chosen to have Gunderic use the arabised term for the sake of narrative consistency. However, it is more likely that a Visigoth of the time would have called it Tingis. Its inhabitants were referred to as *Tingitani* and the Romans used the term Mauritania Tingitana (modern Marocco).

Tariq *ibn* Ziyad: *ibn* in Arabic is a preposition introducing the name of a person's father. For example: *Tariq ibn Ziyad* means Tariq son of Ziyad.

Tarragona: Roman Tarracona.

Temas (of the Byzantine empire): administrative districts governed by a military commander. They consisted of groups of free farmers, who had been granted plots of land in exchange for military service.

Theodosius: in 395, on the death of Theodosius, the Roman Empire was divided into the Eastern Empire, ruled by Arcadius, and the Western Empire, ruled by Honorius.

Teudisclus: name of a bishop referred to in documents relating to the 16th Council of Toledo, held in 693, during the reign of King Ergica.

Theca vulneraria: box containing surgical instruments. A fine example is on display at the archaeological museum in Aquileia (Friuli, Italy).

Time . . . : in the absence of clocks, the position of the sun was used to tell the time of day, which was divided up between prime (cockcrow), terce (the morning break), sext (midday, with the sun at its highest point), nones (mid-afternoon, when work in the fields stopped, and vespers (sunset). The night was very approximately divided between compline (the first hour of darkness), matins (midnight, or the sixth hour of the night) and lauds (the ninth hour). Obviously, since the hours of daylight varied through the year, these divisions of the day and nights could never provide an objective measure.

Toledo: Roman Toletum.

Toletum: Toledo (below); by convention, as with other Iberian towns, the Latin spelling is used until 711, the year of the Islamic invasion.

Torah: Book of the Law in Jewish tradition.

Tortosa: Roman Dertosa.

Tragula: a kind of javelin, fitted with a leather loop to increase the distance of the throw. Widespread among the Cantabrian peoples, but probably of Roman origin.

***Triclinium*:** the dining-room of a Roman house.

Tuy (Tui): Roman Tude or Tuda, an ancient town at the mouth of the Miño, now on the border between Spain and Portugal.

Valle (de Autrigonia): There is an Ason Valley (Valle de Ason) in Cantabria and a Del Valle palace is apparently still standing there. Autrigonia covered the whole of Cantabria in maps of the Visigoth period, until the end of the 7th century.

Vasconians: from the Latin Vascones. The term Wascones was also used (for example, in the writings of Gregory of Tours, 7th century). Today, Basques.

Vespers: the word was used from ancient times to indicate the evening. Vesper (Greek *Hesperos*, the evening star) is in fact the first heavenly body to appear on the western horizon after sunset, and was identified by Pythagoras as the planet Venus. Obviously, the planet is also the last body visible on the opposite horizon when the sun rises. It is then referred to as Lucifer (the morning star).

Via Larga: the well-known Via de la Plata. The Roman road was completed in the time of Hadrian (2nd century AD). It connected Gijon, Astorga and Merida, and ran on to Seville.

Villa Tolita: Little is known of the origins of Villadolid, a town built much later than our story. It seems to have been a village of the Vaccei, a tribe that had lived in this area since earliest times. It is said to have been known to the Romans on account of its mineral springs.

Villa Viziosa: present-day Villaviciosa, on the Asturian coast east of Gijón.

Vindius (Mount): in Roman times and until the early Middle Ages, there was no specific term for what we now refer to as the Cantabrian Cordillera. Map-makers and chroniclers (from Ptolomy to the monk Horosius) used the term *Mons Vindius* as a general appellation for all the mountain chains covering the northern part of the peninsula. The name Picos de Europa, for

the massif rising in the eastern part of Asturias, is of far more recent origin, not appearing on maps until the 18th century.

Vogladensian Plains: Alaric II, king of the Visigoths, was defeated by Clovis I, king of the Franks, in AD 507 in the battle of the Vogladensian Plains (at Vouillé, near Poitiers). As a result, the Visigoths lost the kingdom of Toulouse and settled permanently in Spain.

Xixon: the Asturian name for the town called Gigia by the Romans, or alternatively Campus Turris. During the Middle Ages, it became Gisjon. The modern name is Gijon, a large coastal city to the north east of Oviedo.

Zaragoza: Roman Cesaraugusta.

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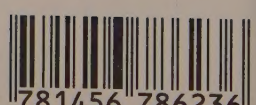

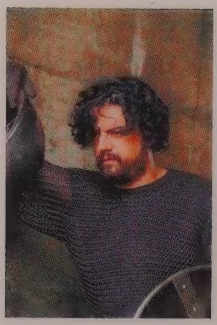

Born in Bassano del Grappa (Vicenza, Italy) in 1963, **Giovanni Dalla-Valle** has always loved time travelling. A vivid dreamer since his early childhood, he would soon consume most of his time reading Giulio Verne, Emilio Salgari and Herbert George Wells. When he finally read The Lord of the Rings, he could easily see the potential for fantasy gender to re-create the past. From his passion for history at school, he moved into an excitement for the future during his University years, when he wrote The Little Voxx Revolution, his first novel. In 1991, whilst serving as medical officer during Gulf War I, he wrote B@bylon Apocalypse which was then published in 2001 and soon favourably reviewed by the most renowned online Italian literary magazines.

From future back to past when, after some mesmerising travels to Spain in search for the origins of the Dalla Valle family, he lost himself among the Asturian mountains and, nearly by enchantment, ran into the legend of Covadonga, the first credited victory of Christians over Moors at the beginning of the VIIIth century. Realising the roots of his ancient family deepened into the dawn of many European nations, he could finally see his old writer's dream materialising: a saga of real people spanning more than a millennium as an epic for all times. The Ruby Cross, one of twelve magic crosses, will then sparkle the light for a fascinating journey into the history of Europe and Christianity, as it was witnessed by the galloping time messengers of an incredible dinasty. (www.giovannidallavalle.com)

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He then obtained a RSA Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Foreign Language and the early part of his career was spent teaching English in Italy and in Madagascar, where he lived many years in a Christian community. A member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists and of the Translator's Association of the Society of Author, he currently lives in Parma, Italy. The Ruby Cross was also proof-read by Adelaide Knight (both in the picture). The translation work, which took nearly a year of close collaboration with the author, is described by Knight as "one of the most enjoyable translations I have ever undertaken". (www.sktrans.co.uk)

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Further information will be found at www.giovannidallavalle.com

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